



THE LAST SIGNAL

BY DORA RUSSELL

AUTHOR OF
"FOOTPRINTS IN THE SNOW"

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VOL. II.

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THE LAST SIGNAL

A NOVEL

BY

DORA RUSSELL

AUTHOR OF 'FOOTPRINTS IN THE SNOW,' 'THE BROKEN
SEAL,' 'THE TRACK OF THE STORM,' 'A FATAL
PAST,' 'THE VICAR'S GOVERNESS,' 'HIDDEN
IN MY HEART,' ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

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THE LAST SIGNAL.

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CHAPTER I.

A LOAN.

MIRIAM did not speak a single word until she reached her own room, and then she fell down on her knees by the bed and buried her face in her hands, while her whole form shook with suppressed sobs.

‘You mustn’t really, Miss Miriam,’ said Ford, in a warning whisper; ‘just think if they were to hear — let me give you some sal volatile — men are not worth it, none of them.’

Miriam lifted her head to drink the sal volatile that Ford held to her quivering lips, and in a minute or two it seemed to revive her.

‘I am better now,’ she said; ‘but oh! Ford, it was so dreadful!’

‘I suppose he’s in a great way about you marrying Sir James?’ answered Ford. ‘That’s just like them all; if they can’t get you, they want you the more, and if they can get you without much trouble, they won’t even take it; and, of course, Miss Miriam, there is no doubt which is the best match—besides, Sir James has your promise.’

‘Yes,’ said poor Miriam, faintly.

‘A doctor is very well, you know, but he’s nothing when a baronet comes in the way,’ continued Ford, meditatively; ‘and in the long run men are

pretty much the same. Don't be angry at me saying it, Miss Miriam, but I wouldn't run such a risk again, I wouldn't indeed.'

'I must go once more,' half-whispered Miriam.

'Oh! Miss Miriam, I wouldn't! One can never tell who is prying about: that Johnson, the orderly, is always hanging about the place, I'm sure I cannot tell what for. And you see, if once one of these men got hold of it one never could tell where it might end, and Sir James is quite the gentleman and is worth making some sacrifice for.'

Ford regarded Sir James with proper respect, because he had at various times since his engagement to Miriam placed a handsome donation in her

willing hand. She was, therefore, really anxious that Miriam should be his wife, and went on praising him while she unfastened Miriam's dark hair, and otherwise assisted her to get ready for bed.

'You had best go, Ford; you must be tired,' at last Miriam said, gently; and accordingly Ford went, and was speedily wrapped in the sleep of the just. But Miriam could not sleep. She seemed to see always again before her Hugh Ferrars' dark face; to feel his kisses still burning on her lips.

'Oh! why did I ever see him again?' moaned the poor girl, tossing restlessly on her bed. 'It seems so false of me, so wicked—and I love him so—and he is so miserable, poor, poor Hugh!'

And when she did fall asleep at last she dreamed of him; dreamed that he and she were standing, hand-clasped, on a precipice, beneath which a dark and stormy sea was breaking, and that he was urging her to leap down with him into the abyss.

‘If you love me—’ he was saying.

And she clung to him in her dream, but still turned her head away and shrank aside; and suddenly between her and the giddy verge came a shining form of light—white-robed, bright, and beautiful—who waved her back, and stood between her and the black depth below.

‘Oh! save me! save me!’ she cried, in terror, and awoke. But when she glanced fearfully around the shining form was gone; the hoarse murmur

of the sea was still. The grey dawn was glimmering through the window-panes; the birds were twittering in the eaves, and Miriam knew that she had dreamed a dream, and shuddered when she recalled it.

She felt ill and weary, but when Ford rapped at the door at half-past seven, and peeped cautiously in to see if her young lady was awake, Miriam told her she meant to rise.

‘You look very white and tired, Miss Miriam,’ said Ford.

‘I feel very tired; I’ve not slept well, but I’m coming down to breakfast,’ answered Miriam; and she did go down. Mrs Clyde was already seated at the table pouring out tea, and the Colonel was reading his newspaper, and they both looked up and smiled

as their young daughter entered the room.

‘Here is a letter for you, Miriam,’ said the Colonel; and as Miriam glanced at it she saw it was from Sir James.

‘It is from Sir James, isn’t it, my dear?’ said Mrs Clyde.

‘Yes, mother, I think so,’ replied Miriam, taking the letter from her father’s hand. But she did not open it; she laid it down by her plate on the table, and as she did so her mother looked at her attentively.

‘Are you not so well this morning, Miriam?’ she asked. ‘Your eyes look so heavy.’

‘I have rather a headache, and did not sleep very well,’ replied Miriam.

‘Your tea will perhaps take it away;

read your letter, my dear, your father and I will excuse you.'

Then Miriam did open her letter, and her heart reproached her as she read the warm and trustful words it contained.

'He is coming to-day,' she said, without looking up.

'That is right. You must make him stay to dinner,' smiled Mrs Clyde.

The Colonel glanced over his newspaper, as his wife spoke, and looked at his daughter, and a certain expression of anxiety stole into his eyes as he did so. Miriam, in truth, was looking exceedingly ill, and her feelings, as she read Sir James's letter, were far from enviable. The more she saw of him, indeed, the more she hated the idea of deceiving him. He was

so honest, so true, it made her own conduct seem baser to her heart. Here was this kindly gentleman writing to her in language of unmistakable affection and trust, and she knew she was unworthy of it all.

One sentence of his letter was enough to tell her this :—

‘I am always thinking of you, dear one; always wishing I could do something to please you. Will you tell me if I can, Miriam? You will make me so happy.’

And the girl who read these words with a shamed heart had fixed to ask him to do something for her that very day. She left the breakfast-room feeling that she could not do this, but by three o’clock in the afternoon she had resolved that she would. She was

torn with conflicting emotions and feelings, but then Hugh Ferrars *must* leave Newbrough-on-the-Sea before General Conray arrived there. And who could she go to but Sir James to ask for help? she argued. Her father was far from a rich man, and the hundred pounds he was going to provide for her trousseau was really a considerable drain on his yearly income. And besides, Miriam knew he would give her money for no such purpose as she required it for had he been ever so rich. Thus she made up her mind to ask Sir James to lend it to her, and ask him she did.

He was standing looking out of the window when she entered the drawing-room armed with her purpose, and when he heard her footstep he turned round

with a bright smile on his face, and went forward holding out both his hands.

‘How are you, darling?’ he said tenderly.

‘I have rather a tiresome headache,’ she answered, with a somewhat wintry smile.

‘A headache? And how did my dear little girl get that?’ and Sir James bent down and kissed the fair face that had lain weeping the night before on Hugh Ferrars’ breast!

This thought struck Miriam, and she started back.

Sir James looked a little hurt, but he said nothing.

‘She is such a shy little darling,’ he reflected.

Then he drew her gently to a couch

near the fire, and sat down by her side.

‘I met Escourt,’ he said, ‘as I was coming here, and I asked him about that poor fellow who was shot on the sands some weeks ago, when you behaved so splendidly, Miriam, and he says he is nearly well again now, and out of the hospital.’

Miriam was conscious that a sudden flush dyed her face, even her white throat.

‘Why, you silly little girl!’ exclaimed Sir James, smilingly, when he saw this sign of emotion, ‘I declare you are blushing over your good deed! But do you know I was interested in what Escourt told me about this Dare. It seems that the man Smith who shot him had some grudge against Dare ;

he's a handsome fellow, Escourt says, so perhaps Smith's sweetheart smiled on him,' and Sir James gave a laugh. 'At all events, they say in the regiment that Smith was suspected of shooting Dare intentionally. But when Escourt questioned Dare about this he positively denied it, and said it was a pure accident, and so saved Smith from a court-martial. So he must be a fine fellow not to get the man who shot him into trouble, and I think I should like to have a talk with him some day and see if I can do anything for him; because, as my sweetheart saved his life, I am naturally interested about him.'

Miriam could scarcely control herself as she listened to these kindly words.

'You have not seen him, I suppose,

since the accident ? ' continued Sir James.

Miriam shook her head ; her lips were mute.

' Suppose we go and see him together, then ? ' went on Sir James. ' He's able to go about, and he no doubt is awfully anxious to thank you for saving his life, and it will be a kindness to the poor fellow, and I'll give him a tip, which, I dare say, will be welcome too.'

' It is very kind of you,' said Miriam, falteringly, turning away her head.

' Shall we go to-day, then.'

' No, not to-day, some other time,' answered Miriam, who was painfully agitated.

' Very well, dear,' said Sir James, kindly ; ' whatever day you like. Perhaps it would worry you to-day, when

you have a headache, but I should like to give the poor fellow something.'

Miriam could bear it no longer; she started to her feet. She drew a long gasping sigh and went to the window to try to conceal her emotion.

'What shall I do? What shall I do?' she was thinking, almost in despair. Too well she knew the fiery, jealous nature of the man Sir James called Dare—of Hugh Ferrars—for it had already cost her and hers terribly dear. And here was Sir James talking of their going to see him together; of putting money into his hand!

She stood silent, with her back to her lover, trying to think, but this did not suit Sir James. He crossed the room, and put his arm round her waist.

‘What is my thoughtful little girl thinking about so gravely?’ he said.

‘Oh, nothing,’ answered Miriam.

‘Well, I’ve got something to say to you, darling,’ continued Sir James. ‘I have told you about my old mother in Scotland, haven’t I?’

‘You have mentioned Lady Mac-Kennon.’

‘Yes; well, to tell the truth, mother is rather a stern old dame, but true to the core, and I hope you will like her, and that she will like you. And she has sent this letter for you. I told her when we were to be married, you know, and she has sent you some of the old family diamonds as a wedding present. Here is the case, which is not a particularly handsome one, but the stones are good.’

As Sir James said this, he put a letter in Miriam's hand, and a jewel case; and Miriam's hand trembled exceedingly as she took them.

'It is very good of her,' she said.

'Let me open the case for you. There! what do you think of that?'

It was a magnificent tiara; the setting of the stones was, however, old-fashioned, but the stones themselves were of great value.

'Oh, it is far too grand for me,' said Miriam, as she looked at the glittering gems.

'Nothing is too grand for you, darling; it is not grand enough. If it were not that I fear it would vex the old dame, I would have it reset.'

'It is quite beautiful. It is very

kind indeed of Lady MacKennon to send it. It—it makes me ashamed.'

'What of?' smiled Sir James. 'It is only natural, isn't it, that my mother should send my future wife a wedding present? I wonder what she has written to you?'

Then Miriam opened Lady MacKennon's letter, and read, written in a stiff, old-fashioned hand-writing, the following words:—

'DEAR MISS CLYDE,—My son tells me that he is to be married to you in a few weeks, so I forward some of the family diamonds for your acceptance. I have never worn them since I lost my husband, for my son is all that is left to me now in this world. I need not say I am anxious about his future

happiness, and to see the wife that he has chosen. He is the worthy son of a worthy father, and I pray that God's blessing may rest on you both.—Yours sincerely,

JANET MACKENNON.'

As Miriam read this letter a deep blush rose to her smooth, oval cheeks, which Sir James noted with a smile.

'What does she say?' he asked.
'May I read it?'

Miriam allowed him to take the letter from her hand, and after he had read it he gave a good-natured laugh.

'What a horribly boastful old lady she is,' he said. 'Behold the worthy son of a worthy father!' And again he laughed heartily.

'She naturally thinks a great deal of you.'

‘Well, all mothers think a great deal of their children, I suppose.’

‘I don’t think ours does,’ said Miriam.

‘Oh, yes, of course she does; she can’t be blind.’

Miriam did not speak for a moment; then suddenly, with a yet deepening blush, she looked up in her lover’s face.

‘Sir James, I am going to ask you something—a great favour.’

‘It’s granted already, then,’ smiled Sir James, taking her hand.

‘I am ashamed to ask it—I scarcely know how to ask it—but will you lend me a hundred pounds?’

Sir James laughed aloud.

‘My dear child!’ he exclaimed, ‘of course I will give it to you.’

‘I will tell you what it is for,’ faltered Miriam.

‘But I don’t want to hear. I will send you a cheque for two hundred in the morning, darling.’

‘But I don’t want a cheque,’ said Miriam. ‘I don’t want anyone to know. I don’t want mother to know—it—it is to help someone—who is poor—to—’

‘My dear one,’ said Sir James, kissing her hand, ‘*you* want it, and that is quite sufficient for me to know. I will bring down the money myself to-morrow; thank you, darling, for giving me an excuse to come.’

CHAPTER II.

TWO HUNDRED POUNDS.

MRS CLYDE was greatly pleased when she saw Lady MacKennon's gift to Miriam. She was a good judge of stones, as, indeed, she was a good judge of most things; and when she entered the drawing-room after Sir James had gone, she at once saw the old-fashioned jewel case lying on a table, and Lady MacKennon's letter beside it.

'I saw Sir James go out, Miriam,' she said; 'is he coming back?'

'No, mother, not to-day; it is a guest

night, and he expects two men to dine with him.'

'And has he brought you this?' said Mrs Clyde, laying her hand on the jewel case.

'Lady MacKennon sent it,' answered Miriam, with a blush.

'Lady MacKennon! That is very nice; may I look inside, my dear?'

'Yes, of course, mother.'

Then Mrs Clyde opened the jewel case, and as she did so a delighted exclamation escaped her lips.

'What a splendid tiara!' she said. 'Why, Miriam, it is magnificent, and,' she added, bending down to look at them closer, 'these stones are of great value and beauty. This is indeed a compliment, my dear!'

'I think it is very handsome, and

it is very kind of Lady MacKennon to send it.'

'It is more than kind; it is most gracious, most generous. I am sure,' continued Mrs Clyde, smiling, 'I should never have parted with them to any son's wife of mine.'

'That is her letter,' said Miriam.

Mrs Clyde read the letter critically, just as she had examined the stones.

'This is a proud old dame, evidently,' she said; 'proud, old-fashioned, and devoted to her son. My dear, she will think no one good enough for him—you must be prepared for this.'

'I am not good enough for him,' said Miriam.

'You think very highly of him then?' answered Mrs Clyde, looking at her daughter.

‘I think—he is very good and kind—most generous.’

‘As I have often told you, you are a lucky girl to have won the affections of such a man. Your future life, my dear, will depend on yourself, for I feel convinced that Sir James will never give you any reason to regret your choice. If you are not thoroughly happy and content it will be your own fault.’

Miriam did not speak; she moved across the room restlessly and repressed a wistful sigh.

‘And where will you keep your treasures?’ asked Mrs Clyde, once more beginning to examine the diamonds. ‘You cannot wear this until you are a matron, you know, and I daresay Sir James will be presenting you with

other diamonds. You had better give them to your father to lock by in his iron safe.'

'Very well, mother; will you take care of them?'

'I feel inclined to steal them,' said Mrs Clyde, with a light laugh.

'I wish you would wear them sometimes.'

Mrs Clyde shook her head gaily.

'No, my dear,' she said, 'these are family jewels, and must grace no one who does not bear the proud name of MacKennon. I shall hope to see you wear them when you are presented, Miriam—and about Lady MacKennon's letter? You must answer it.'

'I am sure I do not know what to say.'

'Oh, between us, I think, we can

compose a proper epistle. She is of the old-fashioned school evidently ; I can imagine her, erect, white-haired, dignified, looking at the world with somewhat sombre eyes.'

'Sir James said she was very true-hearted.'

'Of course ; true to her husband lying in his grave, and to all the family traditions. Well, my dear, you must not disappoint her ; but I am sure you will not.'

'I don't know that, mother.'

'I am not afraid ; and when she sees how devoted Sir James is to you, she will love you for his sake.'

Miriam sighed.

'Shall I take them to your father now ?' continued Mrs Clyde, closing the jewel case. 'I am half afraid to

see them lying about, they are so valuable.'

'Thanks, mother, I wish you would.'

So Mrs Clyde carried away the diamonds, and Miriam stood thinking, after she was gone, of Sir James, and feeling painfully guilty towards him.

'If he were only not so good,' she thought, remorsefully; 'and then he trusts me so, and that makes it worse to deceive him. I should not marry him, or I should tell him the truth, and I cannot do so—for Joan's sake, for poor Hugh's sake, my lips are sealed—and yet it seems so false, so base.'

And she thought this again and again, and her heart always reproached her. She had never liked Sir James so much

as she liked him now. But it was not love that she felt. That subtle passion which comes and goes, unsought for and unretainable, never came near her with its fitful breath when she was with Sir James. The grey-eyed soldier in the hospital, the man whose life was wrecked, and whose fortunes were at the very lowest ebb, she had loved, she did love, though she knew that love must be always silent and secret as the grave.

And her heart reproached her even yet more strongly on the following day, when Sir James arrived with two hundred pounds in notes and placed them smilingly in her hand.

‘There!’ he said, ‘this is the money, darling, that you wanted.’

‘Oh, Sir James, how good of you!’

Have you really brought me a hundred pounds ?’

Sir James laughingly shook his head.

‘No,’ he said.

‘How much, then ?’ asked Miriam, holding the envelope with the notes in her hand.

‘Well, there is two hundred.’

‘Oh, that is too much—I cannot take all that.’ And then her thoughts for a moment took words. ‘I am not good enough for you, Sir James,’ she said, timidly ; ‘indeed I am not—I am not worthy of all your kindness.’

‘What makes my dear one say that ?’ asked Sir James, almost gravely.

It trembled on Miriam’s lips to say something of the truth. To confess—but no, no, she could not ! The con-

sequences might be too terrible, and she shrank back.

‘You are so good,’ she faltered, with downcast eyes.

‘What nonsense, darling? If I am ever good you will have to make me so; your love will have to help me to keep straight. Without it I don’t know what would become of me now, Miriam; you don’t know what you are to me,’ and he took both her hands.

‘I will try,’ said Miriam, still with downcast eyes. She was thinking, ‘I will try to repay you; try never to let you know what would grieve you so deeply.’

She did not even know how deeply. Had Sir James guessed her secret it would have wounded him so sorely

that the scar would have lasted him his life-time. He thought she was a young, shy, lovely girl, with half-awakened emotions, and he naturally never dreamed of the strong and passionate love that had stirred her soul. He had never seen the light in her eyes that had shone there for Hugh Ferrars. Miriam was, in truth, a woman of deep feelings, and her coy shyness with Sir James arose because she knew she was behaving dishonestly to him. And now as she looked at him with his gift in her hand—the money for Hugh Ferrars—she felt she was more dishonest still.

‘But he shall never know,’ she whispered again to herself, and as she did so she put her hand in Sir James’s.

‘About your mother,’ she said. ‘I want to write to her to thank her for her beautiful present, and—shall I tell you the truth?—I do not quite know what to say.’

‘I think she would like to hear from you—oh, say something in your own pretty, natural way.’

‘I mean—do you think she wishes us to marry?’ asked Miriam.

Sir James laughed a little uneasily.

‘Well, you know, she is an old-fashioned woman,’ he answered, ‘and if she had been choosing a wife for me, she certainly would have chosen one with a Mac to her name. She’s prejudiced, and would have preferred me to marry a Scotch girl, but for all that I know she will love you when she sees you, both for your own sake and mine.’

‘Then—she did not like our engagement?’

‘Not at first—to be quite candid; but she knows now I will have no other wife.’

‘But, Sir James—’

‘I will listen to no “buts”; do you think, darling, that twenty mothers could change my heart to you! From the first time I saw you, Miriam, something stole over me I had never felt before; I seemed to live in a new world—and I could not go back to the old one now.’

Sir James spoke these simple but impassioned words in a voice that trembled with emotion, and Miriam felt their truth.

‘But—’ she said, hesitatingly, ‘the knowledge that Lady MacKennon does

—not like me make it very difficult—for me to write.’

‘Dear, she does not know you, that is all, and she will, I am sure, be pleased to hear from you when you will so soon be her daughter. How pleased and proud I shall be to take you for the first time to Kintore, Miriam — to take my dear young wife.’

Miriam did not answer. She was half wishing that Sir James was other than he was; that he was less generous-hearted, less trustful.

‘I should not be so ashamed of myself then,’ she thought. But her reflections were interrupted by the entrance of her mother, who at this moment came into the room radiant and smiling.

‘I have come especially to invite you to dinner, Sir James,’ she said, with a warm clasp of her hand. ‘And I want to tell you, too, how delighted we all are with your mother’s splendid gift. It is beautiful, and I am quite longing to make Lady MacKennon’s acquaintance. I hope she will be our guest at the wedding, and when Miriam writes to thank her for her magnificent present, I shall write also to invite her here.’

‘It is very good of you,’ answered Sir James; ‘but my mother rarely leaves home, and I have never known her leave Scotland; but perhaps on such an occasion—’ and he laughed and looked at Miriam.

‘At all events we must hope that she will be prevailed upon to come,’ said

Mrs Clyde, smiling. 'It will please us all so much, and make my little daughter here feel as if she were truly welcome to her new mother.'

CHAPTER III.

IN STORM AND DARKNESS.

NEVERTHELESS, Lady MacKennon declined the invitation to the wedding which Mrs Clyde penned in her most gracious, graceful style. She wrote back, in that stiff, old-fashioned handwriting of hers, that she was too old to leave home, but that she would be pleased to welcome her son's wife there. It was not a warm nor cordial letter, but, still, there was nothing in it to find fault with. Lady MacKennon was evidently a reserved woman, Mrs

Clyde decided from her guarded words ; and she thought also, though she did not say so, that Miriam's future mother-in-law would be a somewhat difficult person to deal with.

In the meanwhile Miriam was trying to summon up her courage to seek another interview with Hugh Ferrars. A final interview, she told herself, for she would see him no more. He *must* take the two hundred Sir James had given her, and go away and leave England for ever. Nothing else was safe for him, and she would not seem so false to Sir James if she knew it were absolutely impossible that she should ever meet Hugh Ferrars again.

Poor Miriam ! Her heart pulled her one way and her conscience another. But, then, she knew she could not

follow the dictates of her heart. She knew Hugh Ferrars could be nothing to her were she to sacrifice everything for his sake. He must forget her, and she must try to forget him. They had no choice—the danger that dogged his footsteps was real and terrible, but it would be made ten times more real and terrible were she to link her fate with his.

And then she must compromise herself again in the eyes of Ford; of Ford, who knew about the diamonds that had come from Sir James's mother; who knew about the preparations for the wedding; and yet she was obliged to allow Ford to think that she went out alone at night to meet Dr Reed!

But there was no help for it. She could not send a large sum of money

by the post to Private Dare; and, moreover, she believed that Hugh Ferrars would return it if she did. She knew his fiery, impetuous nature, but she hoped to prevail on him by her personal influence to take it. So she must see him, and she could only see him by the assistance of Ford. Luckily Sir James had not said anything again about visiting the wounded soldier. Miriam hoped he would forget that he had thought of doing so, but Sir James rarely forgot an intended kindness.

Thus on the very day that Miriam had made up her mind to ask Ford to post another letter to Dr Reed, containing an enclosure for Dare, to Miriam's dismay, when Sir James called in the afternoon as usual, he began to talk before her mother of Private Dare.

‘Do you know, a very strange thing has just happened,’ he said. ‘I told you, Miriam, I wanted to see the soldier that you were so good to, and I called at the barracks on my way here and asked Escourt to go with me to see him. Well, Escourt went, and I saw this fellow Dare, and a remarkably handsome fellow he is. He was sitting on a bench in front of the barracks, reading, and Escourt spoke to him and said who I was.’

‘How kind of you to interest yourself in him, Sir James,’ said Mrs Clyde, graciously.

‘I was interested in him because Miriam had behaved so bravely when he was wounded, and also because he would not get the soldier who shot him into trouble. And now I am

more interested still; but I will tell you what happened. He got up and saluted when Escourt spoke to him, and then I asked him how he was. He answered very briefly; then I put a couple of sovereigns in his hand, or rather tried to put them into his hand, for he would not take them.'

'Extraordinary!' exclaimed Mrs Clyde, raising her eyebrows.

'Yes, wasn't it?' continued Sir James. "Come, my good fellow," I said, "they'll not do you any harm," and again I offered them to him. Then he looked me straight in the face, and drew himself up, and said haughtily enough, I can tell you: "Sir, I do not take alms," and both Escourt and I were struck in a moment by his voice and manner. The fellow's a

gentleman, there's no mistake about it, and I feel heartily sorry for him.'

'Do you not think it was impertinent of him to refuse your money when you meant it so kindly?' said Mrs Clyde.

'No, I don't; I expect it would be impossible for him to take money from anyone unless he had earned it. That was my impression, and I fancy I am right.'

Miriam never spoke while this conversation was going on. She had hastily turned her head away, and listened with a fluttering heart and bated breath.

'And you really think he has been born a gentleman?' asked Mrs Clyde.
'This is interesting.'

'I am sure of it,' said Sir James.

‘I asked Dr Reed about him later on, and the doctor laughed. “Some poor fellow come to grief, I suppose,” he said, and he did not seem much inclined to talk about him; perhaps this Dare has told him his history in confidence. At all events, he wouldn’t say anything, except that he thought he would soon be all right.’

‘It is strange, certainly; I must ask Colonel Clyde to inquire about him,’ said Mrs Clyde, and then she changed the conversation, and Sir James noticed when Miriam again looked round that her face had grown very white.

She left the room a few moments later and hurried to her own. There was no time to lose, she told herself; Hugh Ferrars must go, or his secret would be discovered. At all events

Dr Reed could be trusted, and so she rang for Ford.

‘I—I want you to post a letter for me, Ford,’ she said.

‘Yes, Miss Miriam,’ answered the lady’s maid.

‘It—it is to Dr Reed,’ faltered Miriam, with downcast eyes.

‘Yes, Miss Miriam,’ again said Ford.

‘You can post it when we are at dinner.’

‘Is Sir James going to stay dinner?’ inquired Ford, demurely.

‘I think so,’ answered Miriam, with shame in her heart.

She felt that she was degrading herself in the lady’s maid’s eyes; that she was degrading Sir James. But Ford made no further comments. She slipped

the letter, which Miriam had already written before Sir James arrived, into the pocket of her gown, and she wondered how her young mistress could be so unwise.

‘Surely she is not going to meet him again,’ she thought, as she tripped downstairs. Then a temptation assailed her. She carried the letter to her own little room, drew it out, and looked at it attentively. It was sealed, but, then, Ford had sealing-wax of her own, and also a neat little seal. She felt very curious; she wondered how far the intrigue with Dr Reed had gone, and if Miriam really meant to marry Sir James.

‘And her taking all his beautiful things, too,’ reflected Ford, with disapproval. ‘Diamonds and all.’

She looked at the letter again, and the temptation became too strong for her. She broke the seal, and found there was a letter and an enclosure, also sealed. Then she read the letter to Dr Reed.

‘DEAR DR REED,’ Ford read with amazement,—‘Will you very kindly give the enclosed letter, as you did the last, to whom it is addressed. I do not know how to thank you enough for your reticence to-day.—Yours very sincerely,

M. C.’

‘Well, this beats everything!’ exclaimed Ford aloud in her utter astonishment. Then she looked at the enclosed letter addressed to Private Dare at the barracks.

‘*Private Dare!*’ repeated Ford.

‘Why, that’s the man who was shot on the sands, when Miss Miriam stopped the bleeding. And she can’t be carrying on with him too, surely? If she goes on at this rate she’ll come to grief, as sure as my name is Rose Ford.’

Then she began looking at the letter to the soldier, and once more temptation assailed her.

‘I may as well see what’s inside,’ she at length decided. And she did see what was inside, and she told herself it was disgraceful. What! Miss Miriam, who was engaged to Sir James MacKennon, who was to be married to him so soon, to be writing thus to a private soldier! It was monstrous, Ford told herself, absolutely monstrous!

DEAR, DEAR HUGH,’—she read,—‘I must

see you once more. Can you meet me to-morrow night at the same hour as we met last—eleven? If so, enclose your answer to my maid, Ford. The same answer as before, nothing more, and I will place the same signal—the light in my window—to let you know I can come.—Yours faithfully, M.'

'Faithfully, indeed!' repeated Ford; nice faith I must say. Well, I couldn't have believed it of Miss Miriam—I couldn't indeed!'

However, there it was in black and white before her, and Ford was forced to believe the evidence of her own senses. She was forced also to carefully re-seal both letters, and with many misgivings posted them. Sir James stayed to dinner, and Ford felt positively sorry

for him. When Banks said to her after dinner,—

‘Sir James seems uncommon sweet on Miss Miriam,’ Ford gave her head a little flounce, but had the discretion, nevertheless, to hold her tongue.

‘Rose,’ continued Banks, who was washing the silver, which had been used at dinner, contemplatively taking a spoon out of the jug of hot water before him, ‘don’t you think folks are better married than single?’

‘That depends on many things,’ replied Ford.

‘In course it depends; but ’spose two people who are a bit sweet on each other—like you and me say, eh?’

‘Speak for yourself, Mr Banks.’

‘I am speakin’, Miss Rose; I’m speakin’ quite plain—and I think they are.’

‘Are what?’

‘Better married; so tell me what you think.’

‘There are many things to be considered.’

‘In course there is—but don’t you like me a bit, Rose?’ And Banks dropped his towel and his spoon, and seized her hand.

‘A very little bit,’ answered Rose, coquettishly.

‘Better than that great lumberin’ fellow, Johnson, the orderly, eh?’

‘Oh! Johnson is nothing to me,’ answered Ford, with a toss of her head.

‘Yet he brags ye’re his sweetheart.’

‘Does he indeed? I wonder how many he has?’

‘Plenty, I dare say,’ answered Banks

with a grin. 'But I've only got one.'

'Jane the housemaid?'

'Jane the housemaid be hanged! No, Rose, ye know better than that—my sweetheart is not far off me now.'

'Oh! indeed.'

'Yes—but oh! bother it, there's the bell; that's for coffee—well, Rose, won't ye give me—' but Rose had fled before Banks had time to make his request.

'But it's quite different just amusing oneself like that,' thought Ford, as she went tripping up the stairs, leaving her disappointed swain behind her; 'there's no harm in nonsense—but about poor Sir James—well I never!'

Sir James, however, was feeling quite content and happy at this moment. Was not every day bringing him nearer

to perfect happiness? If his Miriam looked a little pale and tired, he was only dreaming of the time when he might watch over her and be near her in sickness and in health. He was hanging over her now at the very moment when Ford was pitying him, watching her white supple fingers glide over the ivory keys.

‘May I come to-morrow?’ he whispered.

‘No, not to-morrow,’ answered Miriam, without looking up.

‘But it’s so long to the next day,’ said Sir James, smiling.

‘It will pass away—I have a great deal to do to-morrow,’ and a slight shiver passed through her frame as she spoke.

Then Colonel Clyde approached the

two at the piano, and asked Miriam for a song that was a favourite of his, and while Sir James was seeking for it among her music, he began to tell the story to Colonel Clyde about the soldier Dare having refused his money, and that he was quite sure he was a gentleman.

‘It is possible,’ answered the Colonel, gravely ; ‘I have known of such cases before.’

‘I felt quite ashamed that I had offered him anything,’ said Sir James, ‘he looked so disgusted—but here is the song, Miriam,’ and Miriam took it in her trembling hand.

She did not sing it very well ; she was glad when the evening was over and when Sir James went away. Glad when those kindly grey eyes were

not fixed so trustfully on her face. Their expression silently reproached her, though there was no reproach in them — nothing but tenderness and love. Miriam hated herself for deceiving Sir James, yet told herself at the same moment that circumstances compelled her to do so. She was bound hand and foot. If she alone could have suffered by speaking the truth in these days she would have told it. But there were links within links, bonds within bonds, and Miriam felt herself powerless to escape the meshes in which she had become entangled.

And when, on the following morning, Ford placed a letter in her hand addressed to Miss Ford, there was a look in the lady's maid's blue eyes that made

her shudder, a look which told her as plainly as words that Ford no longer respected her. She did not imagine that Ford had opened her letters, but she thought that Ford thought she was acting wrongfully, and this feeling no doubt added to Miriam's discomfort.

But she opened the letter and read the brief words it contained, silently, though with a fast-beating heart. Then again she was forced to look at Ford, and she saw that her maid was watching her curiously.

‘I—I shall have to go out again to-night, Ford—for the last time,’ she said, with a faltering tongue, ‘and I want you to help me.’

Now Ford had been handsomely rewarded for her assistance on the former occasion, and sovereigns were

dear to the soul of Ford, and she knew that she would no doubt be handsomely rewarded again ; but, still, she had her scruples. For one thing, she thought that ‘Miss Miriam,’ for the sake of a mere fancy, was running a very great risk of ever becoming Lady MacKennon. Now, Ford, as we know, wished to become lady’s maid to Lady MacKennon, and, therefore, her own interests were bound up in her young mistress’s. And a private soldier ! That was what disgusted Ford. She thought her mistress was degrading herself, but, of course, she did not venture to tell her so.

‘To-night, Miss Miriam?’ she only said in a doubtful tone, in reply to Miriam’s request.

‘Yes, to-night—I—must risk it once more—for the last time,’ repeated Miriam.

‘Well, it’s a great risk—Miss Miriam, don’t be angry—but I would not go.’

‘But I must; I have no choice!’ said Miriam, with agitation. ‘I must go as I did the last time—at the same hour—Ford, will you help me?’

‘If you *must* go, Miss Miriam—but I’m just frightened to think of it.’

‘Whatever happens I must go; we must do as best we can. It’s a dull day—I pray God it may be a dark, dull night.’

‘A nice thing to pray about,’ reflected Ford, looking at Miriam’s pale, excited face. ‘I wish it was over, I am sure,’ she said.

Miriam did not speak, and her hopes were realised as regards the day. The weather grew worse as the hours went on, and the wind blew, and dashed the

heavy rain against the window panes. But Miriam scarcely heeded the storm outside. Her heart, too, was tempest-tossed, torn between the past and the present; between love and duty; between fear and a certain wild hope of happiness in again being clasped in Hugh Ferrars' arms.

Once more, Ford, when she came to assist Miriam to dress for dinner, urged her not to attempt to go.

'It's a perfect storm outside, Miss Miriam,' she said. 'Banks says you are just blown off your feet, and the sea's raging. I would not try to go on such a night.'

'Yes, I am going,' answered Miriam.

She was very pale, but Ford saw by the expression of her face that she was resolved, and that it would be useless

to make any further attempt to prevent her. Miriam had indeed arranged everything for her meeting with Hugh Ferrars. She had placed the two hundred pounds which Sir James had given her in a secure packet, and in a small gold locket she had put a curl of her shining hair. She meant this as a parting gift to Hugh Ferrars; a token of their old love to carry away with him into another land.

And the unstaying hours passed on, until the drawing-room clock on the mantel-board chimed the half-hour after ten, and then the Colonel, as was his usual custom, rose.

‘I wish there may not be some loss at sea to-night,’ he said. ‘You must not get a start, Miriam, if you hear the signal guns.’

‘Oh! I hope we won’t hear them, father,’ she answered, and then she presently bade her parents good-night, and went to her own room, where she found Ford awaiting her.

‘It’s a fearful night, Miss Miriam,’ she whispered. ‘Banks thinks there will be some wrecks before the morning.’

‘It’s dark and stormy,’ answered Miriam, placing her lighted candle in the window; ‘so much the better; no one will see us to-night.’

It was cold, and Ford’s white teeth were almost chattering in her head, partly through fear. It was such a terrible risk, she thought—a risk not only to Miriam, but also to herself. For she knew that if this meeting were discovered, not only would Miriam probably lose Sir James MacKennon, but

that she, Ford, would certainly lose her place. But Miriam never faltered. She placed the packet for Hugh Ferrars in the bosom of her dress, and laid a dark waterproof on the bed ready to wear. Then the two girls stood quite quiet, listening to the sullen roar of the sea, and the gusts of wind and rain that swept round the Commandant's house with unceasing violence. They heard, too, Colonel Clyde and his wife go upstairs; heard their bedroom door locked, and they looked at each other. The hour was nearly come — five minutes more to wait — and then they must start downstairs, and Miriam go out and face the howling storm.

And the minutes passed — passed slowly, Miriam thought, as she stood

ready with her waterproof wrapped round her form and head. She did not speak; she pointed with her finger when the dial of the little jewelled watch told the hour. Then Ford opened the room door and they passed silently out, Ford closing it behind them. Down the stairs they glided in the darkness, and through the unlit passages, until they came to the back door of the house. This Ford opened, and as she did so a fierce gust of wind swept in and nearly forced the door out of Ford's strong hands.

‘Oh, don’t go, Miss Miriam,’ she whispered.

‘I must,’ answered Miriam, and the next moment she was facing the storm.

It was all she could do to bear up

against it. The wind blew hither and thither, her waterproof flapped, the rain beat on her face; but, with a sort of desperate energy she went on—on through the rain-soaked garden, on to the roadway outside it. Here the wind rose to a hurricane, and she had to turn and cling to the garden rails to support herself. She was still clinging, unable to proceed, when she heard a step behind her, and the next moment someone put his arm round her.

‘Is this really you, Miriam?’ said Hugh Ferrars’ voice.

‘Yes, Hugh, what a fearful night!’ she answered, breathlessly.

‘Terrible! I never expected you to come.’

‘I came, Hugh, because,’ said Miriam,

still breathlessly, 'because I have brought you the money to go away—it is here—'

'I will not take it.'

'Oh! you must, you must!' cried Miriam, passionately, now clinging to to his arm. 'Hugh, you are not safe here; I cannot rest night nor day for thinking of it; and there is enough here to buy your discharge and for you to go away, right away out of England! Hugh, this is our last meeting on earth—after this we must see each other no more!'

'And you think I would take Sir James MacKennon's money?' said Hugh Ferrars, bitterly. 'You wish me to be out of his way.'

'Oh! do not say so! I wish you to be safe; I wish the—terrible memory of that night to be blotted out.'

‘That will never be to me.’

‘You were not to blame—you thought yourself justified—but, Hugh, it is done: we cannot recall the past; let us try to live it down—to forget it; and this cannot be while you are in England, while you are here.’

‘I will not take Sir James Mac-Kennon’s money to go away, Miriam; if you loved me you would not ask me to degrade myself.’

At this moment such a blast of wind swept over them that they were both nearly carried off their feet. Hugh Ferrars held Miriam’s arm fast, but it needed all his strength to do so.

‘What a night!’ she cried, panting, with her head upon his breast.

‘A fitting night for us to part,’ said Hugh Ferrars; ‘in storm and darkness

—if this is indeed our last parting, Miriam.'

She made no answer; she clung to him, while the storm raged round them and the sea roared below. Then suddenly through the darkness came a flash, and the boom of a heavy gun.

'Oh! what is that!' asked Miriam, in a terrified whisper.

'A ship has struck on the rocks! It is the signal to call out the life-brigade. Hark, and you will hear the Queen's ship in the harbour answer it.'

They listened, and from the harbour came the answering gun.

'Oh! I must go!' cried Miriam; 'I dare not stay—the soldiers will be turning out to help, perhaps my father! Hugh, as a last request, take this packet—there is some of my hair in it; take

it for my sake—Oh! Hugh, help me to the railings, and then good-bye—good bye, dear Hugh!’

She thrust the packet into his hand as she spoke, and a minute later had caught hold of the garden railings for support, assisted by Hugh Ferrars. There was no time to lose; the garrison would no doubt be roused by the signal guns, and the whole place alive with spectators. Already there was the hum of voices heard through the howling blasts. Ferrars did not attempt to detain her. He pressed his lips to hers and let her go, and stumbling, panting, terrified, Miriam fled back to the house through the dark, wet garden, and reached the door, which, as she touched it, was instantly opened by Ford.

‘Oh, Miss Miriam, I believe we’re

ruined!’ whispered Ford, who was trembling with fear, ‘I heard the Colonel’s voice calling Banks. We must try to slip upstairs; we may not be seen.’

They crept through the dark passages; they stole up the dark stairs; they reached the landing on which was situated the bedroom of Colonel and Mrs Clyde. They saw a light flickering below the door from within, and just as they passed it the door opened and Mrs Clyde came out with a lighted candle in her hand, and her eyes instantly fell on her daughter’s drenched and cowering form.

CHAPTER IV.

NO USE.

‘MIRIAM!’ cried Mrs Clyde, in dismay, ‘where have you been?’

Miriam made no answer. She was too terrified to speak, but the quick-witted Ford did :

‘We have been to try and see the wreck, Mrs Clyde,’ she said. ‘It’s an awful night ; we’ve been nearly blown away. We shouldn’t have gone, but Miss Miriam wanted to see a wreck, so we went.’

As the girl hurriedly and mendaciously

made this explanation, Mrs Clyde's stern eyes for a moment left her daughter's rain-soaked figure and rested on the lady's-maid's face.

‘It's just blowing a hurricane,’ continued Ford, somewhat abashed. But Mrs Clyde did not speak; she raised her candle and looked at the two before her. Ford's face was rather pale, but her dress was perfectly neat and dry, and she had evidently not been out in the rain. Miriam's dress, on the contrary, was storm-beaten and disarranged, and her dark hair blown and tangled, and her face white and agitated, and her eyes stained. And Mrs Clyde did not believe Ford's story. In a moment the thought flashed across her mind that Miriam had been out on some secret errand; out alone in the storm for some

hidden purpose, and this idea was absolutely terrible to her mother.

‘Go to your room, Miriam,’ she said, in a strangely-altered voice to her usual placid tones; ‘take off your wet things, and I will bring you some wine. It was madness of you to go out.’

Without a single word Miriam obeyed her, and went with trembling feet to her own room, which was on a higher storey than her mother’s, and Ford followed her also in silence. But when they reached Miriam’s room Ford’s tongue was loosed.

‘Oh! Miss Miriam, what will you say?’ she asked in a terrified whisper, as she proceeded to unfasten Miriam’s wet cloak. ‘We had better stick to the story about the wreck, hadn’t we?’

‘She will not believe it; she does not

believe it,' answered Miriam, falteringly. 'I can say nothing. It is best not to speak.'

'Oh! but Miss Miriam—'

'Hush! do not talk; I cannot bear it,' said Miriam, putting her hand to her forehead as if she were utterly exhausted. 'I—I—feel quite faint.'

She had grown deadly pale, and her whole form was trembling, and Ford grew alarmed.

'Oh! where is the sal-volatile?' she cried, 'or the salts? Oh! Miss Miriam, don't look like that; after all, she can't kill us, you know; let me hold you up.'

Almost as she spoke, Mrs Clyde entered the room, and she at once saw Miriam was too ill to be questioned.

‘Pull off her shoes and stockings, Ford, and chafe her feet. Miriam, lay your head against me; or best, let us lift you on the bed.’

Miriam made no reply, and Mrs Clyde speedily had her wet clothes all removed, and warm and dry ones soon replaced them. Then she and Ford lifted the half-fainting girl on the bed, and Mrs Clyde sent Ford for some brandy.

‘Do not alarm the Colonel,’ she said; ‘say Miss Miriam is not very well.’

When the brandy came, she insisted upon Miriam taking some, and rubbed her feet also with the spirit. But she asked no questions and gave no blame. She was frightened; almost for the first time in her self-assured life

a dread of something she did not understand had crept over her. What! Miriam, her proud, reserved girl, should have gone out alone at night, positively appalled her. Ford, she saw, had not been out; and when Ford began to pluck up her spirits, and said something more about the shipwreck, Mrs Clyde, with a look and a gesture, commanded her to be silent.

She sat by Miriam's bedside, and the girl lay with closed eyes and quivering lips. She was conscious, and thankful to her mother for her forbearance. At last she fell into an uneasy sleep, probably under the unusual influence of the brandy that her mother had given her; and when Mrs Clyde saw this, she signed to Ford to go to bed.

Long Mrs Clyde sat there watching

her daughter—her acute mind seeking for some possible motive to account for Miriam's conduct. That she had gone out to meet someone — some secret lover—seemed to be the only solution that Mrs Clyde could think of. And this thought was most grievous to her. And who could it be? Captain Escourt seemed at one time to admire Miriam, but it had never apparently gone any further than admiration. Indeed, Mrs Clyde did not encourage the attentions of young officers to her daughter. Dr Reed! Could it be Dr Reed? But, no, no, impossible, decided Mrs Clyde. Then she remembered how determinately Miriam had delayed her wedding for a month. Indeed, Mrs Clyde grew more and more uneasy as she reflected.

Good heavens! had the girl been playing a part all this while—perhaps not meaning to marry Sir James after all? Mrs Clyde felt positively afraid to leave the room; afraid to leave Miriam alone, and yet she did not wish to tell her husband that anything extraordinary had happened. It seemed, she thought, a reflection on herself, this strange escapade, that such a thing could have occurred under her roof.

The Colonel had gone out to see after the wreck, but in an hour or so Mrs Clyde heard him return, and as she did so—after another glance at Miriam, who was still sleeping—she rose and quietly left the room. She found her husband taking off his wet cloak in the hall, and she at once went up to him.

‘I fear you have got very wet,’ she said.

‘It’s a tremendous gale,’ answered Colonel Clyde, ‘and the ship on the rocks is breaking up fast. It struck just below the ramparts.’

‘I hope there has been no loss of life?’

‘Unfortunately, yes; but the life-brigade and the soldiers have saved several of the seamen. That Dare, the man who was shot, showed conspicuous courage. One poor fellow was clinging to the rocks, with the waves washing over him every moment, and Dare had a rope fastened round his waist, and swam out to the rocks through the boiling surf, though he was driven back again and again, and ran the risk of his life, but at last

he reached the rocks, and managed to get hold of the poor drowning sailor, and then the men on shore pulled in the rope, and Dare brought the man in alive. It was a brave action, and Dr Reed and Escourt both went up and shook Dare by the hand, but the doctor blamed him at the same time, and said he was not well enough yet to have done such a thing.'

'That is the man they think is a gentleman, is it not?' asked Mrs Clyde, thoughtfully.

'He looks like one, at any rate—a fine-looking fellow, with a daring expression of face. I went up and spoke to him, and he merely bowed. Reed seemed anxious about him, and insisted on his leaving the shore before I came away.'

Mrs Clyde did not speak for a moment.

‘By-the-bye, how is Miriam?’ asked the Colonel. ‘Ford came for the brandy just as I was going out, and said she was not well.’

‘The guns startled her, and she turned faint. She is asleep now,’ answered Mrs Clyde, quietly.

‘She is not strong, poor girl.’

‘No; but, come, I must see after your comforts. I am sure you ought to take some brandy.’

Colonel Clyde did not refuse his wife’s offer, and as he sipped his cognac he once more alluded to the soldier Dare.

‘I think there must be some history attached to this Dare,’ he said; ‘for just before he plunged into the sea he

went up to Dr Reed and asked him to take charge of a small packet which he had in his hand. "I may not return, you know, doctor," he said, "and if I do not, will you see this is safely delivered to—you know whom?" Escourt thought he said, so I suppose Reed knows all about him. At all events, after he had saved the man, I saw Reed give him this packet back, and, moreover, Reed would not say anything about it.'

'A packet?' repeated Mrs Clyde.

'It looked like a big envelope, and Dare carried it away with him when the doctor insisted on his leaving the shore; some gift from his sweetheart most likely, poor fellow.'

'Yes, most likely,' said Mrs Clyde, and then she left the room and

went upstairs once more to look at Miriam.

She was still sleeping, and her mother stood watching her with an uneasy heart. The girl looked beautiful, and stirred uneasily in her restless slumber. And presently Mrs Clyde stole away, as she did not wish to disturb her husband, but again and again during the night she thought anxiously of Miriam.

And her anxiety did not decrease on the following day. Miriam was low and feverish and kept her bed, and Mrs Clyde was still afraid to question her. She herself made no allusion to the storm of the night before, and she avoided meeting her mother's eyes, and visibly shrank every time Mrs Clyde entered the room. And something—an

undefined suspicion, perhaps—prevented Mrs Clyde speaking to her daughter of the bravery of the soldier Dare. But Ford was not so reticent. She had heard from her admirer, Banks, that the soldier who had been shot on the sands had saved a poor sailor's life at great risk to his own, and Ford could not resist telling this to Miriam. She was curious, indeed, to see the effect of her communication on her young mistress; and when she saw the startled look of fear, first in Miriam's eyes as she listened, and then the gleam of pride that lighted them, Ford came to the conclusion that 'Miss Miriam' certainly had a very strong regard for this young soldier.

But the day did not end without a greater surprise still happening to Ford.

While the Colonel and his wife were at dinner, Ford hurried up to Miriam's room in a state of much excitement, and, having closed the door, went up to the side of Miriam's bed.

‘Oh, Miss Miriam,’ she half whispered, ‘such a thing has happened!’

‘*What ?*’ asked Miriam, in sudden fear.

‘I’m so put out I can scarcely tell you,’ continued Ford. ‘But just about half-an-hour ago I was standing at the back door doing nothing particular ; indeed, I thought Johnson, or one of the orderlies might be coming to the house, as it was about Johnson’s time to bring the Colonel’s letters, and I wanted to know if he had heard anything about the poor sailors who were wrecked, or if any more bodies had

cast up. Well, I was standing looking out when a soldier passed me, and he looked at me, but of course I didn't think anything of that. I saw it wasn't Johnson nor any of the men I knew, and I wondered how this soldier could be hanging about there. But in half a minute he was back again, and this time he spoke to me.'

"Are you Miss Clyde's maid, Ford?" he asked, in a low tone. I said "yes;" and then he whispered to me to come out for a moment or two into the garden, and I thought I would go, though I was in an awful fright that Banks or any of them should see me. However, I knew Banks was busy with his silver in the butler's pantry, and I wanted to know what this young man had to say, so I went out a few steps

into the dark, and again he whispered to me.

““You are sure,” he said, “that you are Ford, Miss Clyde’s maid?” “I am quite sure,” I answered. “And you sometimes get letters for her?” he asked next. “I have got them,” I said. “Then I wish you to give her this packet,” he went on; “to give it to her when no one else is present. Will you do this?”

‘I said “yes,” and he put it into my hand. This is the packet, Miss Miriam,’ continued Ford, drawing out the large envelope which Miriam had placed the night before in Hugh Ferrars’ hand, and which had contained the two hundred pounds in notes, and when Miriam recognised it she gave a little cry of despair.

‘Oh! why did you take it?’ she said.
‘And yet—and yet—’

She tore open the sealed envelope as she spoke, and Ford’s blue eyes instantly assumed an avaricious expression when she saw the roll of crisp new notes. But Miriam never thought of her, nor of the notes. She was eagerly reading a letter which the envelope had also contained, and her eyes grew dim with tears as she did so.

‘DEAR MIRIAM,—Always to me most dear Miriam,’ she read—‘I am about to try to find an opportunity to return the money you brought me last night, which it is impossible for me to take. Do not ask me to do so again; it pains me, it humiliates me, for you

to do so. But I will keep the locket you brought me, and when I die it will be fastened round my neck as it is now, and, if I am conscious, I will ask those near me to lay it in my grave. I will try—and I think Dr Reed will help me in this—to effect an exchange into some regiment in India, and so will pass away out of your sight and out of your life. Forgive me all the sorrow I have brought you. Ours, indeed, has been a miserable fate—oh, most, most miserable, Miriam!—but it has not cut into your heart as it has cut into mine, and no doubt happier days are before you. I have nothing left to live for, and will welcome death; while you—but I cannot write of it. Shall I—may I—see you once more—for the last time? H. F.’

By the time Miriam had finished reading these desponding words her tears were falling fast. The bank notes lay unheeded on the bed, except by Ford, who could not take her eyes off them; and as Miriam raised her arm with a desponding attitude, and covered her face with her hand, they fell upon the floor.

‘Oh, Miss Miriam, look at all this money rolling about!’ cried Ford, stooping eagerly down and picking up the roll of notes.

‘It is of no use now,’ murmured Miriam, with a sort of moan.

‘Oh, yes, Miss Miriam; money’s always of use,’ answered Ford, lovingly fingering the notes.

Then Miriam looked at the girl with her tear-stained eyes.

‘You can keep one of them,’ she said, ‘for—for bringing them to me. And, Ford, did he say anything else? How did he look?’

‘May I really have one—a whole five-pound note? Thank you, Miss Miriam, I am very much obliged. Did he say anything more?’ continued Ford, pocketing her note and laying the others once more on the bed. ‘Yes, he did; he asked how you were, and I told him you were ill, and that we had both got into great trouble with going to meet him last night, as Mrs Clyde had caught us.’

‘Oh, Ford, you should not have said that.’

‘Well, Miss Miriam, all I can say is, I am sure Mrs Clyde means to give me notice, by the way she looks at

me. But I hope you won't forget me when you marry Sir James, for I am sure you will remember I did not wish you to go?'

'Yes, I know,' said Miriam, sorrowfully.

'It was an awful risk, you know, Miss Miriam; and your marriage so near.'

'And—did he say anything more?'

asked Miriam, wistfully.

'I said as your marriage was so near; and he never spoke. Then in a little bit he said, "Give her the packet." That was all, and the next minute he had disappeared, and when I ran back to the house, if there wasn't Banks that I thought I had safe enough, on the look out, and was as impudent as ever he could be! But I

told him I wouldn't stand that kind of thing, and so ran past him and came straight to you.'

'Thank you,' said Miriam, wearily. 'Reach me my little desk, Ford; and now you can go.'

Ford handed Miriam her desk, in which she placed the notes, but not the letter she had received from Hugh Ferrars. This she held still in her hand, and after Ford had left the room, she pressed it against her lips.

'Poor Hugh,' she murmured, 'it was no use then—no use!'

CHAPTER V.

MIRIAM'S REQUEST.

WHEN Mrs Clyde came upstairs to inquire how Miriam was after dinner, she still said nothing on the subject which was so sorely troubling her own mind. But on the following morning she felt she could not forbear doing this, and when she entered Miriam's bedroom, carrying in her hand a letter which had arrived from Sir James, her face was very grave.

‘Here is a letter for you, Miriam, from Sir James,’ she began.

Miriam stretched out her hand, and took it in silence.

‘Are you better this morning?’ continued Mrs Clyde.

‘Yes, a little, thank you, mother.’

‘Miriam,’ said Mrs Clyde, still more gravely; ‘will you tell me now, then, how and why you were out in the storm the night before last?’

Miriam did not speak.

‘You *must* tell me, Miriam; I can bear the anxiety no longer. What induced you to leave your father’s house at such an hour?’

Then Miriam lifted her dark eyes, and looked straight in her mother’s face.

‘Mother, I cannot tell you,’ she answered, with a firmness that surprised Mrs Clyde. ‘My errand did no good

—was no use—but there is something I wish to speak to you about—about my marriage.’

‘About your marriage?’ repeated Mrs Clyde, with a sinking heart.

‘Yes, I wish now not to be married here; I wish to go to London—Sir James, I know, will agree to this if I ask him—and I hope you and my father will also.’

Mrs Clyde did not speak for a few moments. She stood looking sternly at her young daughter; the most painful thoughts were passing through her mind.

‘You have a strong reason for this, I presume?’ she said at length.

‘Yes, a very strong reason. I ask you to make no objections, mother, for I cannot be married here.’

‘And you wish to keep this motive a secret from me?’

‘I have no choice—don’t say anything more, mother,’ continued Miriam, with sudden and strange excitement of manner, putting out her hands as though to prevent Mrs Clyde speaking. ‘It would do no good—none to any of us—I am willing to keep my promise to Sir James; to marry him when I said I would, but not here.’

Again Mrs Clyde was silent for a few moments; again she fixed her eyes on her daughter’s face with strong disapproval. Then she said slowly,—

‘I must think this over; your conduct is most strange. I little thought that a child of mine would have cost me such great anxiety—I will come back to you in an hour.’

She left the room after she had said this, and returned to the breakfast-room where her husband was preparing, as usual, to go out on his military duties. But she said nothing to him of Miriam's strange request. And after he went out she sat down in great perplexity. Some secret, the idea and fear of which made her almost shudder, had evidently induced Miriam to act in so extraordinary a manner. She thought once of writing to her daughter Joan, to make certain inquiries, but on second thoughts she was afraid to do this. It was wiser to keep everything quiet. Miriam had shown strange obstinacy in putting off her marriage a month, and she had persisted in this, and would no doubt persist in refusing to be married at Newborough-on-the-Sea.

Best let her have her own way, at last decided Mrs Clyde, and best leave Newborough as soon as possible. The danger must be *here*, and the quicker Miriam was away from it the safer she would be.

But Mrs Clyde felt terribly shocked at the whole affair. She was a worldly woman, but honourable in her way, and her husband was highly honourable. And she felt that Sir James MacKennon was being deceived. Still, it would be madness to say anything. If once Miriam were married, this folly, whatever it might be, would surely end. Therefore Mrs Clyde resolved to be silent, and to arrange that the marriage should be in town, as Miriam had wished.

And presently she returned to her

daughter's room to tell her this. She found Miriam up and dressed, and Sir James's letter lying open on the table; but Miriam hastily pushed it aside as her mother entered. She was ashamed, perhaps, that she should see his loving, trustful words.

'I have decided it shall be as you wish,' said Mrs Clyde, as she watched this sudden action of Miriam's. 'You shall be married in town at the time you fixed—you will not, I trust, deceive me again?'

'No, mother, I will not,' answered Miriam, without looking up.

'And you will not, I hope,' continued Mrs Clyde, with some excitement, and her fine complexion flushed as she spoke, 'you will not deceive the honourable man you are about to

marry, and whom, I am sure, trusts you completely?’

‘I will not,’ said Miriam, slowly and painfully; and her face also flushed deeply.

‘Then I shall say no more. Whatever this secret is that you are keeping from your best friend, let me entreat you at least to bring no discredit to Sir James. You risked your reputation the other night, you must remember; surely you will do so no more?’

‘Mother, I have promised; do not be afraid.’

‘Let us leave here at once. Is Sir James coming to see you to-day?’

‘Yes.’

‘I will propose the change to him; best let it come from me—let us leave here to-morrow. I will explain to Sir

James that your trousseau will require all the time that is left to us to procure it,'

'I will go when you like; I am glad to go,' said Miriam.

'That is settled then. Will you come down to lunch, Miriam?'

'If you wish it, mother.'

'I do wish it. I wish all that has passed during the last two days to be spared your father. It has been pain enough to me, so I ask you not to let it worry him.'

'Very well,' answered Miriam, sadly; and then her mother went away. And after she was gone, Miriam sat down to write a few farewell words to Hugh Ferrars.

'Good-bye, dear Hugh,' she wrote; 'it is better I should see you no more;

but please remember that if ever you should want that money which you returned last night, that it is ready waiting for you. I will keep it for you, and you can have it at any time. If you require it, write to my maid, Ford, enclosing a letter to me. And now, farewell—farewell, dear Hugh, and may God keep you and watch over you.—

‘ M. C.’

This brief note written, Miriam addressed it to Private Dare, and then rang for Ford and requested the lady’s maid to post it. But Ford held up her hands in despair.

‘ I dare not, Miss Miriam,’ she said, ‘ I really dare not ! Your mamma sent for me this morning, and forbade me positively to go out or leave the house

on any account until we leave for London to-morrow. She said, "If you do, and I shall have you watched, I shall discharge you at once, and refuse to give you any character, so do so on your peril."

'I do not know what to do then,' answered Miriam, 'Could you trust it to Banks?'

'No, miss; I'm sure I couldn't. If I gave Banks a letter to any soldier he'd think I'd written it, and he'd think nothing of opening it or putting it in the fire; he's that jealous he's just like a madman, and no more to be trusted than a baby in arms.'

'What can I do then; it must go?'

'Wait till we get to London, Miss Miriam, and then I'll find plenty of opportunities of slipping out of the hotel

or getting one of the strange waiters to post it for me ; but as for trusting Banks, it's not to be thought of.'

And, upon second consideration, Miriam thought this would be the wisest plan. She therefore locked the letter by that she had written, with the money she had obtained from Sir James, and at luncheon-time went downstairs, and tried, before her father's eyes, to look as if nothing had happened. Mrs Clyde had judiciously told the Colonel that he had better not say anything to Miriam about the storm.

'Her nerves have been shaken ever since she was ill,' she told him ; 'and it would only upset her if you told her about the painful scenes on the rocks, and as Sir James is coming this afternoon I want her to look well.'

So the Colonel said nothing to Miriam about the victims of the cruel sea ; nothing of the gallantry of the soldier Dare. He shook hands with his daughter, and spoke kindly to her, and Miriam answered him quietly, and Mrs Clyde's easy tact did the rest. Then about three o'clock Sir James arrived, and Mrs Clyde was in the drawing-room with her daughter when he came, and received him with great cordiality.

‘We are going to give you a surprise,’ she said smilingly, as she shook hands with him.

‘And what is that?’ he answered, smiling also.

‘We are going, Miriam and I, to start for town to-morrow by the mid-day train, to see after all Miriam's smart frocks ; and then the Colonel and I

have determined to have the marriage in town, if you do not object?’

‘Certainly I do not object,’ said Sir James.

‘Well, I shall tell you our reasons for this change. You see about here there are hosts of people who would expect to be invited to the wedding, and this house is so small. Whereas, in town, we need have no one but my daughter Joan and her husband, and an old friend or two, perhaps, of my husband’s. And I don’t like fussy weddings, and Miriam does not like them.’

‘And I am sure I don’t,’ said Sir James, delightedly and honestly. ‘All I want is Miriam, not a whole lot of people to stare at us.’

‘Then we are all of one mind,’ answered Mrs Clyde, pleasantly; ‘and we will

keep the day a secret until the great event is over. And now I think the Colonel will be wanting me, and I know,' she added, smiling, 'that you young people wish me away.'

So she left them, and Sir James crossed over and took Miriam's chill, little hand tenderly in his.

'I'm so pleased about this, darling,' he said; 'it's so much jollier to be quiet, and have it all to ourselves. Don't you think so, Miriam?'

'Yes, I am sure I do,' she answered, truthfully.

He stood looking at her, still clasping her hand, and turning her diamond engagement ring gently round her slender third finger. All his heart was full of her, and Miriam's dark eyes fell before his eager gaze.

‘I’ll try to get leave at once,’ he said, presently, ‘and follow you up to town immediately. We’ll go shopping together, Miriam, or shall we leave Mrs Clyde to buy the frocks and the wedding gown, while we—’

‘And what shall we do?’ asked Miriam, with a faint smile, as he paused.

‘Oh! I don’t care a bit, as long as we are together; that’s all I care for, Miriam. If only I have you with me—that’s everything I want.’

‘That is very foolish of you, Sir James.’

‘Don’t call me Sir James in that formal way, dear; call me Jim—your own Jim.’

‘I wonder if I could,’ said Miriam, a little wistfully, and she glanced shyly at his face.

‘Of course you could; only you are such a shy little girl. I know you don’t

care for me as I care for you, Miriam ; no one could care so much, I think, but still, in time—will you love me a little bit, dear?’

‘You—are very good,’ said Miriam, with a strange choking feeling at her throat, and she put her hand again into his, and Sir James stooped down and tenderly kissed it.

‘What a dear little hand,’ he said ; ‘ my little hand ; the hand that is to rest in mine, I hope, till we grow old and grey. Fancy this pretty dark hair, soft and white,’ and he touched one of Miriam’s little curls as he spoke. ‘ But there will be no change in our hearts, Miriam—none at least in mine.’

‘How can you tell?’ said Miriam, and again she looked at him.

‘I know,’ he answered, presently, ‘I

think of no one else, Miriam ; whatever I do, your image is before me. That is not the sort of love that grows cold. Even if you were to cease to care for me, I should love you still.'

'I shall not change,' said Miriam, in a low, almost a solemn tone ; and these words made Sir James so happy and excited that the world seemed only full of bliss to him.

He stayed to dinner, and Mrs Clyde's shrewd eyes saw that as far as he was concerned that everything was going on as well as she could wish. Miriam was very quiet, but she looked handsome, and her mother tried to forget the haunting shadow that had pursued her for the last two days. At all events, she meant to fulfil her engagement. Mrs Clyde felt sure, and this was the

great point. She would be Lady Mac-Kennon, and Mrs Clyde believed her incapable of disgracing her husband's name.

Thus the evening passed; the last evening that Mrs Clyde intended that Miriam should spend at Newborough-on-the-Sea until after her marriage. Sir James promised to see them off the next morning at Halstone, from which place they were going to start on their journey to town. Then, after he was gone, all was bustle and packing at the Colonel's house. Miriam had little time to think, and when at last she did retire to rest, she was so tired that she speedily fell asleep. But when she awoke the next morning all the past rose again very vividly before her.

‘Poor, poor Hugh,’ her heart whis-

pered, as she looked out on the misty sea. But it could not be; it could never be, she also told herself. She must forget him; and he must forget her in a new and far-distant life; and Miriam gave a weary sigh.

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Most of the rest of the day was spent in travelling. Colonel Clyde and his wife and daughter drove to the station in the early morning, and the carriage passed the gates of the barracks where the soldier Dare was now quartered. Miriam just glanced at the whitewashed walls, and then turned away her head. She did not see the pale, set, handsome face at one of the windows, eagerly watching for the carriage. Dare had heard, somehow or other, that the Colonel's wife and

daughter were leaving Newbrough-on-the-Sea that morning, and he easily guessed why Mrs Clyde was taking Miriam so swiftly away. Ford had told him that they had both got into trouble by meeting him the night of the storm, and, of course, this was the upshot of it. And the soldier smiled bitterly and with quivering lips as the carriage passed, and for a moment he caught a glimpse of Miriam's face. Then he sat down moodily, and more than once his grey eyes fell on the sentry's rifle, who was pacing below. He was weary of his life; this shamed and hidden life, the bitterness of which his heart only knew. Presently Dr Reed came into the room, and as he approached Dare, he stopped and looked curiously at him. There was some-

thing so dark, so tragic in the expression of the young man's face that the doctor felt half alarmed.

‘Well, Dare, how are you this morning?’ he said.

Dare rose and saluted, and answered in a forced and husky voice,—

‘All right, sir.’

‘You don't look all right, anyhow. Is your leg paining you?’

‘I think not,’ said Dare. He had forgotten all about it; had forgotten everything in the overpowering bitterness of this moment. And Dr Reed at once understood this. He, too, knew that Mrs Clyde and her daughter had just left Newbrough-on-the-Sea; he had heard a rumour also that Miss Clyde was to be married while they were away, and he felt

sorry for the pale young soldier before him.

‘We must all make the best of things, you know,’ he said, by way of commonplace consolation. ‘We all have our troubles, Dare, and there are days when I believe the most of us wish we had never been born.’

‘Why *were* we born?’ said Dare, darkly, forgetting for the moment his assumed character. ‘Born against our wills to suffer temptations and miseries which we have no strength, or at least not strength enough, to control.’

‘But the chaplain would tell you we ought to find strength,’ answered the doctor, with a smile.

‘But what does he know of the temptations and passions of other men’s hearts?’ continued Dare, with extra-

ordinary bitterness. 'Is the flicker of a candle like a raging fire, or a pond like the deep sea? Yet he tells us all the same the weak and the strong are alike to God.'

'Of course temperament makes a great difference.'

'But we do not make our temperaments? We are born as we are, and the heart only knoweth its own bitterness.'

'You have strong feelings?'

Dare gave a harsh, strange laugh.

'Yes,' he said, 'I have that curse. Even as a boy I was headstrong and passionate, and when I grew to be a man—'

'I understand,' and the doctor nodded; 'of course a woman was at the bottom of it.'

‘I went, at least, to the devil for one—but this is folly—I am forgetting myself.’

‘Never mind; you must learn to take things easier, Dare; after all, in a few years, what will it matter?’ And the doctor nodded and passed on.

‘In a few years,’ muttered Dare, and then he too turned away, but the black cloud was still upon his brow.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SISTERS.

Two days after her arrival in town, Miriam herself posted the letter she had written addressed to the soldier Dare at Newbrough-on-the-Sea. And she had some little difficulty in doing this, for she was conscious that her mother watched her closely. Still she found her opportunity, and after the letter was gone she felt with a sorrowful heart that she could do no more. In the meanwhile Mrs Clyde was going on actively with her pre-

parations for the marriage. Then Sir James joined them in town, and he naturally was constantly with Miriam, and so the days glided away until it wanted but three to the one on which Miriam had promised to become Sir James's wife.

On this day—the third before the marriage—General Conray and his wife arrived in town to be present at the ceremony. The sisters — Joan and Miriam—had not met for long, and they met now with deep though suppressed emotion. They clasped each other's hands, they kissed each other, and in both their dark eyes there was a troubled look of secret meaning. There was an extraordinary likeness between them, and this struck their mother more vividly than usual.

‘How like you two are!’ she exclaimed, looking at her daughters as they stood together. ‘I declare you grow more like each other every year.’

‘Yes, there is great likeness between them, certainly,’ said General Conray, who was present at this meeting, but neither Joan nor Miriam spoke; they just glanced at each other a moment and that was all.

Presently the General went out, and Mrs Clyde was called away, and the sisters were alone. Then again they looked at each other, and once more silently clasped each other’s hands. Miriam was the first to speak.

‘Joan,’ she said at length, in a trembling voice, ‘I—have so much to tell you.’

‘About Sir James?’ asked Joan, looking earnestly at her sister.

‘Oh! no, no, Joan,’ and Miriam’s voice sank to a whisper; ‘who do you think I have seen—have talked to?’

‘Not—’ and Joan’s face suddenly paled. ‘Not—’

‘Hugh Ferrars,’ whispered Miriam below her breath, and her face, too, grew pale; ‘I saw him at Newbrough.’

‘At Newbrough!’ echoed Joan; ‘what was he doing there? Did—he go to see you? Oh, Miriam, surely not!’

‘We met by chance. Oh, Joan, what I have gone through! One day there was an accident on the sands—a soldier was shot who was marking at a target—and I was there. I ran forward to try to help to stop the

bleeding, and when I looked at the man's face—it was Hugh Ferrars.'

'Oh, Miriam! Oh, Miriam!' and Joan clasped her hands despairingly together.

'It was Hugh, Joan. He is a soldier; and — and he knew me as I knew him, and he looked at me. Oh, I shall never forget that hour.'

Suddenly Joan Conray's face changed, and a strange light shone in her eyes.

'I should have hated him!' she cried passionately, and she clenched her little hands. 'Did he die? I should have been glad to see him die!'

'Oh! Joan!'

'Yes, Miriam, for did not that man kill my life—all that made my life worth living!'

‘Oh, hush! Oh, hush!’

‘And you kept silent?’ went on Joan, still excitedly. ‘You screened him still?’

‘Yes; Joan, do not speak thus—you forget, you forget!’

Joan Conray gave a kind of moan and flung herself on a couch near, and covered her face with her hands.

‘Oh! poor Robert,’ she moaned. ‘Oh! Miriam, I cannot, cannot forget.’

Miriam went up to her, and stooped down and kissed her brow.

‘Hush, hush, Joan,’ she said; ‘he, poor Robert Conray, is at rest; but Hugh, think of his misery, his remorse, his wasted life.’

Joan did not speak. She rocked herself to and fro as if in bitter grief.

‘He’s so changed; oh, so changed,’ continued Miriam; ‘but I knew him at once, and I was afraid, if General Conray came to Newbrough, that he also might recognise him, and so I put off my marriage. I wanted to see him to tell him to go.’

‘I thought he was abroad; I hoped we should never see or hear of him again,’ said Joan, now looking up. ‘And you saw him? Do you mean you spoke to him?’

‘I met him twice and spoke to him. I met him at night—I pitied him so much; and—and I also could not quite forget—’

‘But, Miriam—oh, surely, Miriam!’ and it was now Joan’s turn to look at her sister entreatingly, ‘you surely won’t let this come between you and right?’

Miriam raised her eyes and looked at her sister, and Joan understood the silent reproach.

‘I know! I know!’ she cried, and once more she put her hand over her face. ‘I have no right to speak; I am the last one that should dare to speak; but, Miriam, let my shipwreck, my broken heart, my broken life, be a warning at least to you.’

Again the younger sister was silent for a few moments, and then she said slowly and painfully,—

‘It is best not to speak of these things, Joan—of the past, even between ourselves. I would not have told you that I had seen him (Hugh) except that you must persuade, must try to prevent, General Conray from going near Newbrough until Hugh

is gone. I got him the money to go at once, but he would not take it, but he said he should try to be transferred to some regiment in India. He is best away ; best out of my sight, and, I pray and hope, out of my mind ; best for his own sake and for mine ; for—for I mean to try to be—'

'A good wife,' said Joan, eagerly, as Miriam paused with sudden hesitation and a blush ; 'Oh, do ! Oh, do, my dear,' she continued, passionately ; 'God knows there is no real happiness, none, none when even the fondest love is mixed with constant fear. I was always afraid, and Robert was always afraid for me, and afraid and ashamed, too, when he remembered his uncle. But we were blinded ; we thought at times only of each other, and you see

the end! Death to Robert, and endless, unending misery to me.'

'You will get over it, dear Joan; you will forget it, I pray and trust.'

'*Never!* I shall never forget the dying look on Robert's face—his last words. They haunt me day and night, Miriam; they have burnt into my brain, and are killing me, slowly killing me. But I pray only my husband may never know; not in this world, at least, and in the next he will know—if he knows at all—our temptations, our struggles—how, how we loved each other so long, so long! From the time I went to Tyford, the young wife of an old man, I loved Robert, and to think that I caused his death; that my very love killed him!'

'General Conray must never know,

will never know,' said Miriam, who was deeply moved by her sister's grief.

'But for you he would have known: had you not come forward as you did and said that it was you who were with poor Robert that night he would surely have suspected me. The soldier who swore at the inquest that he had seen Captain Conray with a lady in the grounds at Tyford, as you remember, said he thought it was the General's wife—but then you, you, my dear, came forward to save me: you said you were engaged to Robert, that you were with him shortly before the shot was fired that caused his death—and—and Richard believed this!'

'He must always believe it, and I did it to save you, and would do it again. And, Joan, you should pity Hugh

Ferrars too. He was mad; he thought he had been so cruelly, so disgracefully deceived. Robert Conray was his friend, his most trusted friend, and he knew—how we had loved each other—Hugh and I: and when he thought I was false, doubly false, and Robert Conray falser still, he told me he grew mad. He fired the fatal shot, and then when he knew what he had done—when he recognised you, his bitter remorse was terrible, is terrible now, and he would have given himself up if I had not prayed him, for your sake, for all our sakes, to go away.’

Joan Conray moaned aloud.

‘We must all bear it as best we can,’ went on Miriam, more bravely; ‘it has been very hard to bear since I saw Hugh again; since my engagement. I

have felt false to Sir James; have felt that I am deceiving him, and he is so good, so noble; it seems such a shame not to be quite honest to him. But I cannot be; I must keep this miserable secret, for Hugh's sake, for yours, for my own. He must never know, and General Conray must never know. Only you and me, Joan, and we must carry it to our graves.'

'I wonder if I shall see him there, after I am dead?' said Joan in an awe-struck whisper.

'Don't think of such things; try to forget them,' answered Miriam.

'But I cannot, I see Robert constantly before me; I dream of him; sometimes I fear I will talk of him in my sleep.'

'Oh! Joan.'

'I've a kind of haunting dread of

this. Oh! if I did—oh! Miriam, if I did!’

‘You are nervous, my poor, poor Joan.’

‘Yes, I know, weak and nervous; and sometimes Richard begins talking of Robert, wondering over his terrible fate, and I have to listen! Miriam, believe me, I lead a miserable life!’

‘And I—’ began Miriam; but at this moment one of the hotel waiters rapped at the room door, and the sisters started apart.

‘Sir James MacKennon is below,’ said the waiter, ‘and wishes to see Miss Clyde,’ and he handed Sir James’s card to Miriam as he spoke.

‘You can show him up,’ answered Miriam, and once more the sisters looked at each other and were still.

CHAPTER VII.

THE FIRST DOUBT.

WOMEN, as we all know, have the character of being much better actors in society than men. They hide their worries, their disappointments, their pains. They smile over them, whereas men, as a rule, easily let us see that something is amiss. Therefore, when Sir James, happy and smiling, entered the sitting-room where Joan and Miriam had just spoken such tragic words, he did not perceive their shadow on the fair faces of the two sisters.

He had not seen Mrs Conray before, and when Miriam introduced them he was struck, as most people were, by the strong likeness between them. True, Mrs Conray was more fragile-looking; but the features, the eyes, the height, were almost exactly the same.

Sir James warmly held out his hand and took Joan's when Miriam presented him.

'I am so pleased,' he said, in that kind, cordial manner of his, 'to make your acquaintance, Mrs Conray—Miriam's sister;' and he smiled at Miriam.

'I am very pleased,' answered Joan.

'Anyone could tell you were sisters,' went on Sir James, still smiling.

'I am older than Miriam,' said Joan.

'Not a great deal,' smiled Miriam.

'You both, happily, are at that age

when years do not tell their tale,' answered Sir James. 'But I am very pleased indeed to know you, Mrs Conray.'

They talked a little while on ordinary subjects after this, and then Joan rose, in her usual languid way, to leave the room.

'I feel a little tired with the journey, Miriam,' she said, 'and so I shall go and lie down for an hour. I shall see you again at dinner, I suppose, Sir James?'

'I hope so,' he answered, brightly; and then after he had opened the room door for Joan he returned to Miriam's side.

'Your sister is wonderfully like you,' he said, taking Miriam's hand in his own; 'but I am glad my darling looks a great deal stronger than Mrs Conray.'

‘I think Joan looks ill too.’

‘She’s a very pretty woman, awfully pretty, but she looks delicate, and, as she said, tired.’

‘She is easily tired.’

‘Poor little woman! And are you too tired, dear, to go out for an hour with me?’

‘Oh, no.’

And so the betrothed pair went out together, and Sir James bought many pretty things, and ordered flowers, and took stalls for some favourite play. He was rich, and he was happy, and nothing pleased him so much as to spend his money in pleasing Miriam. He never dreamt that the cold shadow of fear lay always athwart Miriam’s heart; never thought that the dark-eyed girl by his side hid away in her soul a

tragic and gloomy past. Who can tell these things? Vice does, as a rule, lay its ugly finger on the human face, but many a dark story and storm will pass and leave no trace. When they returned to the hotel, presently fair, stately, elegant, with shining jewels round her white, swan-like throat, Joan Conray entered the room dressed for dinner and going to the theatre afterwards, what did she look? A handsome young matron of whom her old husband might well be proud. There was a quiet dignity about this woman, who but a few hours ago had told her sister that her heart lay murdered in her murdered lover's grave. Mrs Clyde felt that evening proud of her two daughters, and yet an uneasy feeling lingered in her mind regarding Miriam. But not

for Joan! This acute woman could not look beneath the fair, serene and pensive mask that General Conray's wife habitually wore.

‘Joan is very dignified-looking,’ she said, that evening a little later, to her husband, and Colonel Clyde assented with a smile.

‘Your sister looks quite content with her choice,’ also remarked General Conray, a little later, to his wife. ‘It’s very well. I suppose she has quite forgotten poor Robert now?’

‘I suppose so,’ answered Joan, a little huskily, and she turned away her head.

And so the next two days passed away—passed in buying presents and flowers, and the General and the Colonel found many of their old

military friends at their clubs, and Colonel Lowrey came to dine with the Clydes, and brought his offering for the bride also. They all indeed seemed very happy and content, though Miriam looked somewhat pale, and the very day before her marriage something occurred which considerably disturbed Mrs Clyde.

This arose from Ford giving formal notice to quit Mrs Clyde's service. Ford had been enjoying herself in town also, and had already ensnared the affections of a young, good-looking German waiter at the hotel. And now seeing that her young mistress was actually about to become Lady Mac-Kennon, of which Ford had had many doubts, she applied to Miriam to become her maid, and Miriam, for

reasons that we know of, had consented.

Ford then proudly had gone to Mrs Clyde with this information, and asked leave to depart with the bride. And Mrs Clyde, who had engaged a maid for Miriam, felt exceedingly annoyed.

‘I must speak to my daughter about this, Ford,’ she said; ‘do you say Miss Miriam has asked you to accompany her abroad?’

‘Yes, Mrs Clyde,’ replied Ford, demurely.

‘I shall inquire into it,’ said Mrs Clyde, and on the first opportunity that she had she spoke to Miriam very seriously on the subject.

‘Miriam, my dear, I wish to speak to you about Ford,’ she said.

‘Yes, mother,’ answered Miriam.

‘She tells me you have asked her to go with you to Paris.’

‘Yes, it was an old promise that when I married she was to be my maid.’

‘My dear,’ began Mrs Clyde, very gravely, and then she paused. ‘I do not approve of your choice, Miriam,’ she added. ‘I do not think Ford is efficient enough to be your maid in your future position.’

‘I am accustomed to her, mother. I do not care to have any new woman about me.’

‘But, my dear, consider — Ford is not a steady young woman—and then she might talk of what had better never be mentioned in your husband’s household.’

Miriam’s pale face flushed.

‘I understand what you mean, mother,’ she said, ‘but you need not be afraid.’

‘I am not afraid of you, do not mistake; but I am afraid of her idle tongue. Far better to have someone with you who has only known you in your matronhood.’

‘I have promised Ford.’

‘But you can easily get out of such a promise. I have engaged a maid for you; take my advice, Miriam, and accept this stranger and not Ford.’

Mrs Clyde spoke urgently, but Miriam was quietly determined.

‘It is settled, mother, with Ford,’ she said, ‘and it will be no inconvenience to you, I hope, as you have engaged another maid. When you spoke of it the other day I thought this other maid would do for you.’

‘I wish you may not regret this, Miriam,’ replied Mrs Clyde, warningly. ‘I do not like Ford; I do not trust her; take care you do not trust her too much.’

But Miriam knew, as her mother said this, that she had already been forced to trust Ford ‘too much.’ She knew, too, to a certain extent, she would be obliged to go on trusting her. And therefore she was forced to disregard her mother’s warning, and Mrs Clyde left her room with that strange uneasiness in her heart about her daughter’s future, which had lately troubled her so much, considerably augmented.

But the marriage morning dawned—and the sun was shining—and everything seemed to look promising and

prosperous for the bride. It was a quiet wedding, but the stalwart good-looking bridegroom seemed so completely happy, and the bride so fair, that everyone who looked on them ought to have been satisfied. That Sir James was, there could be no doubt, and that shadow of hidden fear was not visible on Miriam's face. Yet as she entered the church in her trailing white garments, leaning on her father's arm, she did for a moment glance quickly round. But the dark handsome face, that perhaps she dreaded to see, was not there. Only a few spectators attracted by the carriages outside, only the eager lover waiting for her within. And nothing interrupted the ceremony. There, in the presence of her nearest friends—her father and mother, and her

sister and her husband—Miriam Clyde promised to be James MacKennon's wife, 'and forsaking all other, keep truly unto him.'

And Joan Conray heard these solemn words, and gave a little shudder, knowing how she had kept *her* troth. And the grey-haired General, whose wife she was, looked at her with softened eyes, remembering the day when they too had taken these vows, and when his young wife had been given to him 'to love and cherish.' And in his way — for he was naturally a reserved and somewhat stern man—General Conray had truly loved his wife. She, to do her justice, had never fathomed the depth and strength of his feelings towards her. She had married him against her girlish will, and she had

always thought of him as an old man, and her heart had ever been cold to him. But she respected and *feared* him. She dreaded above all things that he should ever suspect that dark secret and its tragic end that had blighted her life. She gave him no cause for suspicion now; she lived indeed as it were above it, and the General was proud of her beauty and her stainless name.

But presently it was all over, and Lady MacKennon passed down the aisle on her husband's arm, and the small party returned to the hotel for the wedding breakfast. Here they were joined by Colonel Lowrey and two other old comrades of Colonel Clyde's. All the men of the party belonged to the Service, and had grown grey in it, except the bridegroom. And Sir James's

spirits were absolutely boyish during the meal which followed. He was elated beyond measure as it were, for had he not won his heart's desire? He was in the morning of his life, but these grey-haired soldiers around him smiled a little grimly perhaps as they watched his exuberant content. *They* knew if he did not that shipwreck may come on the life voyage as the storm strikes the bravest vessels on the sea. None of us indeed here need be too full of joy. Troubles lurk everywhere, and let us be thankful if they pass our door. Thankful, but not elated, neither by success, nor wealth, nor beauty, for all these things, if they come, may pass away.

Nevertheless, Colonel Lowrey, when he rose to propose the health of the

bride and bridegroom, spoke only of the roseate things of earth. He was an old bachelor, kindly but frosty, and had known Colonel Clyde's children in their long clothes. He also liked Sir James; liked his ingenious and open devotion to his young wife.

‘It is like a glimpse into the past,’ he told them, ‘and makes old soldiers like the rest of us,’ and he looked smilingly round, ‘recall the time when we too did not think of our wine, nor our dinners, nor our easy chairs, but of bright eyes and rosy lips, like our gallant bridegroom is doing now. And certainly Sir James MacKennon has some excuse for losing his head, and I only wish I was young enough once more to lose mine! But no such luck. I admire a pretty face still, but I look upon it

very calmly and soberly, probably from the fact that no pretty face ever looks at me; or if by any chance a pair of bright eyes were to rest on my furrowed visage, they would rest very calmly and soberly too! I have let my time for good things slip past, but Sir James has taken time by the forelock. Here is this lucky young man married to a lovely young girl, in the very bloom of her womanhood, and so no wonder he looks delighted. As for the bride, she was a sweet little baby not so many years ago, my friends, and in those days I once had the privilege of kissing her, which I must honestly say she resented so deeply that she screamed for an hour afterwards. I know I never attempted to take such a liberty again, and ever after at the sight of me she

hid her face on her ayah's shoulder. But I must not go on with these tender recollections. You all know what she is to me; the daughter of an old and valued friend, and I should not have been at all pleased if I had not liked her husband. But I do like him, and so I now 'propose the health and happiness and long life, and every blessing to them, of Sir James and Lady Mac-Kennon. If all the good things come to them that I wish, their cup will be full indeed.'

Colonel Lowrey having ended his speech, which was received with much cheering and good humour, sat down, and Sir James presently rose to reply to it.

'Colonel Lowrey, ladies and gentlemen,' he said, smilingly, 'Colonel Lowrey

has just told you I look very much delighted. I do not know what I look, but I know what I feel. I feel perfectly happy, and very proud of myself; for have I not won the sweetest and loveliest bride that I think a man ever did win? And she was not very easy to win either; so it's no wonder I am a little bit off my head. Therefore I won't trespass any further on your time, as I cannot be expected to talk very sensible to-day, but I thank you most heartily, in the name of my young wife and myself, for all the kind things you have said of us, and I can only add that I hope my wife may some day soon have the pleasure of seeing you all in her new home at Kintore.'

These simple kindly words were naturally very well received, and indeed

the whole entertainment passed off in the pleasantest and most joyous fashion. Then the young pair started on their journey, and before they left Miriam had a word to whisper in her sister's ear.

‘Forget what I have told you about Hugh,’ she said; ‘let it always be a secret between us.’

‘Yes,’ answered Joan, and she clasped Miriam's hand tightly, and for a moment the two stood looking at each other with steadfast eyes. Then came all the excitement of leave-taking, and finally the carriage disappeared that bore the bride and bridegroom away. It was all over, and Mrs Clyde breathed a little sigh of relief. Then a curious dulness fell upon the company. The men lit their cigars, and presently went out, having arranged to dine with Colonel Lowrey at his club.

Only Joan and Mrs Clyde remained of the party, and almost for the first time since she had joined them in town Mrs Clyde had an opportunity of speaking in private to her eldest daughter.

The two ladies were sitting together by the fire, as the early winter gloaming gathered round them, and presently, after some desultory conversation, Mrs Clyde said,—

‘Joan, Miriam is married now, and therefore it does not matter much, but still there is something I should like to ask you about that unfortunate young man, Robert Conray, to whom she was first engaged.’

Joan started, and her lips began to quiver, but she did not speak.

‘Do you really think they ever were engaged?’ continued Mrs Clyde. ‘Miriam

said so at the inquest, I know, but she had never hinted such a thing in her letters to me; and that other admirer of hers, Mr Ferrars — was there not some suspicions—’

‘Oh, mother, don’t speak of that dreadful time!’ cried Joan, starting to her feet. ‘What good does it do now? Miriam is married. It is best not to speak of these things any more.’

‘My dear Joan, do not excite yourself; but I have a reason for asking these questions. Of course you will never hint or breathe what I am going to tell you to a living soul. But an extraordinary thing happened just before we left Newbrough-on-the-Sea for Miriam’s marriage. There was a dreadful storm one night, and we were all disturbed by it; Miriam had gone to bed some time

before I supposed, but, to my astonishment, when I opened my bedroom door I met her drenched with rain and half-fainting. It was a terrible shock to me; she must have been out for some purpose; to meet someone on such a night, and who could it be? None of the young men down there I believe; and I have sometimes fancied could it have been this Ferrars that she thus met in secret? He disappeared did he not after young Conray's murder?'

'I know nothing; can tell you nothing,' answered Joan, desperately.

'But, my dear, there is no harm in you and me discussing it? General Conray disapproved of this Ferrars, did he not, as a lover for Miriam?'

'Yes, he was poor and in debt they said, and—Richard did not like it.'

‘So he wrote to us at the time of his nephew’s unfortunate death. It was never quite known, was it, whether Robert Conray was murdered, or had committed suicide?’

Joan visibly shuddered.

‘I see it agitates you, my dear, talking about it,’ said Mrs Clyde, calmly; ‘and it certainly was a dreadful thing to happen in your own grounds. Perhaps Miriam might have quarrelled with him or refused him, and he may have shot himself in a moment of desperation, for no doubt she is very attractive to men; or it may have been this Mr Ferrars. At all events we ought to be very thankful she is married, and of course Sir James knows nothing of this unfortunate affair, and he is, no doubt, very much attached to her.’

‘Yes; may she be happy,’ said Joan, briefly, and then she left the room, and her mother thought after she was gone that her manner was very strange.

‘Joan is so odd at times,’ reflected Mrs Clyde, ‘yet she and her old General seem to get on very well; I wonder if she knows more about Miriam than I do; at all events she does not mean to tell.’

Therefore Mrs Clyde determined to ask her no further questions. The mother and daughter had tea together and then dinner, but Mrs Clyde said nothing more about Miriam’s former lovers. They talked of Sir James, and of the Dowager Lady MacKennon, and wondered how Miriam would like her new people and her new home.

‘She is a proud, old-fashioned dame,

to judge by her letters, I should say,' said Mrs Clyde, 'and very devoted to her only son. But I do not wonder at that; Sir James, to my mind, is simply perfect.'

'He seems to have a very good heart,' answered Joan.

'And is quite clever enough for a husband,' smiled Mrs Clyde; 'either remarkably handsome men, or remarkably clever ones, seldom make good husbands. They are too much flattered, and they cannot live without it, but Sir James is quite good-looking enough, and has quite brains enough to satisfy any reasonable woman.'

They talked in this fashion a little while longer, and then Joan said she was tired and would go to bed. But her mother sat up until her husband

and General Conray returned. They had enjoyed their evening, and after having dined with Colonel Lowrey, the three old comrades had gone to see some new play, and sat discussing it over their cigars and whisky-and-sodas, and describing it to Mrs Clyde.

‘Joan was tired and went to bed early,’ Mrs Clyde told General Conray.

‘The excitement of the wedding tried her, I suppose,’ answered the General; ‘and Joan very soon gets tired now. I don’t know how it is; I must try not to disturb her when I go upstairs, as I dare say she is fast asleep.’

‘She looked very pretty to-day,’ said Mrs Clyde.

‘She is always pretty,’ replied the General; and presently, when he

went upstairs, and as noiselessly as possible entered the room, he thought he had never seen Joan look so fair.

The room was lit—a soft, warm, subdued light filled it—and, with her head resting on the pillows, Joan lay asleep. Her dark hair was unbound, and one white arm, bare to the elbow, rested lightly outside the down coverlet. She was a lovely picture, with lips slightly apart, and her dark lashes resting on her round, smooth cheeks. Her husband stole nearer, and almost held his breath, so afraid was he to awake the fair woman that he loved. He stood watching her; watching her breathing softly, and the curves of her white throat. Then presently she stirred slightly, and murmured a word in her sleep. The General—the grey-

haired old man—bent his head down and listened tenderly.

‘*Robert,*’ he heard in plaintive accents ;
‘*Robert !*’ And he started and drew back.

The slight noise that he made awoke her, and she opened her dark eyes languidly and looked at her husband.

‘Were you dreaming, Joan ?’ he asked.

‘I don’t know ; I think so,’ she answered, still looking at him.

‘You were talking in your sleep ; you mentioned poor Robert’s name,’ continued the General.

Then suddenly a red wave rushed to the fair face, dying it crimson from the white brow to the white throat, and a great look of fear stole into her eyes.

‘I was dreaming—of Miriam,’ she faltered ; ‘have you been long here ?’

‘No,’ said the General; but a strange, cold feeling crept into his heart as he spoke. The first dawn of a miserable doubt.

CHAPTER VIII.

A HAUNTING DREAD.

GENERAL CONRAY slept little that night. He lay still, revolving in his mind the circumstances of Robert Conray's death. They haunted him with grim distinctness; he saw again his dead nephew's face; he heard the evidence at the inquest, and the doubts as to how he had died.

It had never been satisfactorily cleared up. Captain Robert Conray, a handsome, distinguished-looking young man, who at this time held an appointment

on General Conray's staff, had one morning been found dead in the grounds of Tyford Hall, where the General lived, with a bullet wound in his throat. He had been dead for hours the doctors said when he was discovered, and whether he had died by his own hands, or been murdered, remained a mystery, as his wound, the doctors also stated, might have been self-inflicted. But no weapon was found near him, and one witness—an orderly, who was passing through the grounds with the letter-bag containing the letters by the last post for the General—stated that about ten o'clock in the evening he had seen Captain Conray in the grounds with a lady, whom he believed to be the General's wife. But Miriam Clyde then came forward and stated that it was *she*, not

her sister, that the orderly had seen with Captain Conray. She had met him in the grounds about ten o'clock, and parted with him an hour later, leaving him alive and well. She added that she was then engaged to be married to him, though this fact was known only to her sister Joan. She was asked if she had had any quarrel with him, and she said no. And Joan had confirmed this statement. But after a while grave suspicion had fallen on a brother officer of the deceased, named Hugh Ferrars. This young man was known to be an admirer of Miriam Clyde, and was said to have been passionately in love with her. But General Conray had disapproved of his suit, and had forbidden him his house. And from the morning that Robert Conray was found dead in

the grounds of Tyford Hall, Lieutenant Hugh Ferrars had disappeared. At first this did not attract any attention. He had been on leave at the time, and only when his leave expired were inquiries made about him. But these were all in vain. He had been staying in town when he was last heard of, and his luggage was found at the hotel he had lived at, but the man himself had vanished. He had never been seen or heard of since the day that Robert Conray had died. He had left the hotel that day, saying he would return on the following day, but he never came back. His people were communicated with, but they knew nothing. His father was the clergyman of a country parish in Yorkshire, and during part of his leave he had been at home. Then

he had gone up to town, and they had heard nothing of him since. Presently people began to talk of him in connection with Robert Conray's mysterious death. They had been intimate friends, but if both had been lovers of Miriam Clyde here was a motive at once for Robert Conray's murder. At all events, a warrant was finally issued for his apprehension, but the police were completely baffled. No trace of him could be found, and he had passed away from the knowledge of his fellow-men as completely as if he were dead. His parents believed him to be dead, and mourned for him, but General Conray had never been quite satisfied on this point. True, he might have been robbed and murdered, and thrown into the dark waters of the river, rolling noiselessly through

the great city, and hiding some of its misery and sin. This was the theory of the hapless country parson, who came up to town to assist in the search, and stood hopelessly on bridge after bridge, peering down into the Thames, believing that his son's body lay somewhere in its gloomy depths.

All this had happened nearly two years ago, and had faded out of the recollection of most people, but General Conray had never forgotten his nephew's sudden death, and he lay thinking of it now, and that look of fear in Joan's eyes, when he had asked her if she were dreaming of 'poor Robert,' had driven an uneasy pang of strange doubt into his heart.

And to Joan his words had brought absolute dread. She had told Miriam

she was always dreaming of Robert Conray, and now she had spoken of him in her sleep! A haunting fear of this had possessed her ever since his death. What if this grim secret, that the two sisters had hidden in their hearts so long, were to be betrayed by babbling words she could not control? Joan shuddered when she thought of it. She must not sleep she told herself; she must lie awake if it killed her. And she did lie awake; lay pinching the white flesh of her arms to keep the drowsy feelings of weariness away. Oh! the long miserable hours! The General slept at last, but not Joan. The gloomy November dawn found her pale, haggard-eyed, but alert. And she noticed that during the day that followed the General looked at her

more than once with an expression in his eyes she had never seen there before. Could any suspicions of the truth have entered his heart? But no, no; Joan told herself this was impossible. Still her nerves felt shattered, and her sleepless night had wearied her so that in the afternoon she declined to go out with either her mother or her husband, but lay down and took the rest she so much needed. For she must not sleep during the night. Joan had set herself this task, and for two more nights she kept to her resolution. They were the last two nights they were to spend in town, the Clydes returning to Newbrough-on-the-Sea, and the General and his wife to Tyford Hall.

Joan was delicate, and this enforced

sleeplessness told greatly on her health. Both her mother and her husband felt anxious about her during these last few days in town ; but Joan made no complaints. Then the wedding party broke up, and Joan and her husband started for Tyford.

She felt so weary on the journey it was all she could do to keep herself awake in the train. Her eyes closed involuntarily, and she could scarcely hold up her head. It was late in the day before they reached the station nearest the General's house. Then came a long drive in the dark, and by the time they reached Tyford Joan felt completely exhausted.

She sighed wearily as she entered her comfortable and well-furnished home. The General had taken Tyford Hall

when he had been appointed to the Southern District which he commanded, and he had brought his young wife there as a bride. It stood in extensive and well-kept grounds, and from the upper windows you had a glimpse of the sea. It was in these grounds that the tragic death of Robert Conray had occurred, and Miriam had never visited her sister since.

Joan thought of Robert Conray as they drove up to the house; thought of him as she entered the well-lighted hall, as she walked up the broad staircase. To her the whole place was haunted by his memory. Yet she had never suggested to the General any wish to leave it. He had taken it for a term of years, and it was conveniently situated for his command, being only

about half a mile distant from the barracks.

A letter from Miriam, the bride, awaited Joan. The General brought this up to her after he had opened the letter-bag. Joan put out her hand languidly to receive it, and as she did so her husband noticed how extremely pale and tired she looked.

‘You are quite done up, Joan,’ he said; ‘all this business about the wedding had been too much for you; you must have a good rest to-night.’

‘Yes,’ answered Joan, all the while determined that she would take none.

‘Well, what does the bride say?’ went on the General.

Then Joan opened her letter, which was from Paris. Miriam wrote cheerfully, and there was no allusion in it

to the past, which both the sisters regarded with such shrinking dread. She mentioned her husband's name once or twice, and told her sister what lovely furs James had bought her. 'He is very good and kind to me,' she added, 'and very unselfish.'

'She seems all right,' said Joan, after she had finished reading the letter, and then she handed it to the General, who also read it, and then laid it on the table beside his wife.

'Well, I hope she will be happy,' he said. 'She has got, I believe, a good husband, and I trust she will make a good wife.'

Joan did not speak, and then the General laid his hand upon her shoulder.

'And you, poor little woman,' he

said, 'must go to bed directly after dinner. You are dead tired, and nothing but a sound sleep will refresh you.

He left the room after this, and Joan then took some sal volatile to keep herself up, and dressed for dinner. And after dinner the General insisted she should retire for the night.

'I have a lot of papers to go through,' he said, 'and it will be twelve or later before I have done. But you must go to bed at once. Come, Joan, it is quite time you were there.'

And at this moment it passed through Joan's mind she might indulge in the sleep she so much required before her husband came upstairs. She was utterly exhausted, and her eyes heavy with drowsiness, and she felt she would give almost anything for an hour's sleep.

‘Very well,’ she said, ‘I will go.’ And she rose and left the room, while her husband went to his library to work.

Joan was so tired that three minutes after she was in bed she was fast asleep. Asleep when twelve o’clock came, and the General quietly entered the room. She was sleeping the deep sleep of utter exhaustion, and she never heard her husband’s footsteps. She looked worn and white, he thought, and he made as little noise as possible, and very soon afterwards he also was asleep.

When he awoke it was the morning. He awoke with a start, and glancing quickly round he heard Joan’s voice speaking in loud and unnatural tones. He looked at her attentively, and saw by the dim light she was still asleep.

She was dreaming, but her features wore an expression of great suffering, even anguish.

‘Don’t look like that — Robert! Robert!’ she cried. ‘Robert, speak to me—say one word!’

She stretched out her arms as she spoke, as if entreatingly; her voice was full of intense pain, and the General drew back in sudden dread and listened with bated breath.

‘Robert!’ she wailed out once more; ‘*Robert!*’ and then her expression changed. ‘Why did you do it?’ she asked with startling suddenness, as if addressing some invisible presence. ‘He did *you* no wrong; he was mine, not Miriam’s—only mine!’

There was silence in the room after this; a silence that the sleeping woman

broke no more. But the grey-haired man by her side rose and crept away; the iron had entered into his soul.

CHAPTER IX.

A FEVERED BRAIN.

JOAN went down to breakfast at the usual hour, for her dream-haunted sleep had refreshed her in spite of all its horrors. But her husband was not in the room, nor did he return during the day until dinner-time. This frightened Joan, for the General was always thoughtful of her, and she began to fear that something was amiss. And at dinner-time she was sure of this. The General was so cold and stern in his manner, and he

made no explanation nor apology for his absence.

‘You have been away all day,’ said Joan, timidly addressing him.

‘Yes,’ he replied, briefly, and during dinner he scarcely spoke. Then Joan thought of her long sleep, and wondered if her tongue had spoken in her dreams. She dare not ask the man who sat opposite to her with unbending brow. And the General never alluded to it. Joan’s sleeping words had smote him sharper than a sword. He began to remember little things. Joan’s complete prostration when Robert Conray died, and Miriam’s firmer mood, though she declared the dead man had been her plighted lover. Good God! had this fair woman deceived him all these years? the General had thought many a time

during this miserable day. Had *she* loved Robert Conray, and not her sister? Had *he* shot himself in the shame and anguish of his sin? Filled with distracting doubts and fears he knew not how to act. And Joan sat trembling, knowing that something had happened; that something stood between her and her husband's love.

And when she went to her room at night the servants were conveying a bed into the General's dressing-room.

‘What is this for?’ she asked.

‘The General ordered it to be put here, ma’am,’ replied one of the servants, and Joan said no more. She sat down, half-benumbed in her room, and put her hands over her face. Had the blow fallen? What did he mean? And Joan moaned aloud.

Hours afterwards she heard the General go into his dressing-room, and lock the adjoining door. Then she crept to bed, but dare not sleep. And this went on for many days and nights. The General barely spoke to her, and Joan lived a miserable life of doubt and fear. But the strain was too great to last. Joan's health broke down, and when the doctor was sent for, he said she had fever. She grew worse and worse, and one night became violently delirious, and her maid, who was watching her, got frightened, and ran down to the General, who was in the library, for assistance.

Then he went upstairs, and stood by Joan's bed, who started up when she saw him. Her eyes were shining with fever, and her face was flushed,

and she evidently did not recognise him.

‘Who are you?’ she asked.

‘Joan—’ began the General, but with a wild, unnatural laugh Joan waved him away.

‘You need not stay,’ she said; ‘you are an old man—call Robert—Robert Conray, my dead lover.’

The General started and gnawed his lips under his white moustaches.

‘Call Robert Conray and the man who killed him,’ went on Joan, yet more excitedly. ‘He is hiding, the coward who killed my Robert—Miriam knows where he is hid—ask her, she has him safe.’

‘Go from the room; I will watch her,’ said the General with pale, faltering lips, addressing the maid; ‘she is

best kept very quiet when she is wandering thus.

So the maid went away, and the husband and wife were alone, and then once more the General addressed her.

‘Joan, is there any truth in this?’ he said; ‘or are they but dreams?’

Joan’s face softened strangely.

‘Dreams?’ she repeated. ‘I see Robert in my dreams, and the man who killed him.’

‘Who was the man?’ asked the General, sternly.

‘Hugh Ferrars,’ answered Joan, readily; ‘and Miriam hid him.’

‘Where did she hide him?’

Joan put her hand to her head as if trying to recollect.

‘Somewhere by the sea,’ she said. ‘I can’t remember, but somewhere by the sea.’

‘And he did this?’ said the General, darkly. ‘He shot Robert Conray. Why did he do it?’

‘He shot him and he died—he died!’ moaned Joan, beginning to wring her hands, and fling herself to and fro in the bed. ‘He tried to speak—he looked at me. Don’t you know my gown was all blood—blood! Miriam burnt it—it was Robert’s blood—it drained right down into my heart!’

‘My God!’ muttered the General, below his breath, ‘this is too terrible.’

‘Why do you stare so!’ now asked the delirious woman, peering in her husband’s pale face with her gleaming eyes. ‘Did you know Robert? He was not old like you—he was young—there was none like him—none, none!’ And once more she wrung her hands,

and then went on with her babbling words.

But the General asked no more questions. He sat there as if turned to stone, listening to Joan telling again and again her pitiful story. It had burnt into her brain, as she told Miriam; and now, when reason had lost its sway, the one dominating idea was ever on her tongue. She rambled on for hours—telling the stern, grey-haired man who was watching her, how she used to meet Robert Conray in the still gardens; how they had loved each other, and how he had died. At last General Conray could bear it no longer. He started up and rang the bell, and bade the servants go for the doctor—bring him at once—and when he came he gently shook his head after he had examined her.

‘The fever is running very high to-night,’ he said; ‘she must be constantly watched.’

Then the unhappy woman began again the old story of Robert Conray’s death, and the doctor listened, and the General bowed his grey head and covered his face with his hand.

‘That unfortunate occurrence has evidently got on her mind,’ said the doctor. He too knew this tragic story, and how the General’s nephew had been found cold and stiff in the early morning in the grounds of this very house. There might be some truth in all this, and there might not. At all events, he spoke of Joan’s wild words as the mere ramblings of delirium. He stayed with her for some time, and he said he would send two

nurses in the morning. She must be watched night and day. She might try to throw herself out of the window; she might do a hundred things, for in cases of fever you could never depend on the patient for a moment.

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Joan was very ill for days, for weeks after this; so ill that her father and mother were telegraphed for, but when they arrived, she had sunk into a state of listless apathy. She did not rave now or talk of her dead lover. She lay with her eyes half closed, and rarely spoke. She seemed to recognise her parents, but without interest. Mrs Clyde tried to talk to her about Miriam, but Joan never answered.

‘Would you not like to see her, my dear?’ said Mrs Clyde. ‘She will soon be home now, and I am sure she would come and see you at once if you wish her to do so?’ But still Joan made no reply.

General Conray was standing in the room when Mrs Clyde said that, and he presently turned round and addressed Mrs Clyde.

‘When did you say Lady MacKennon would return?’ he asked.

‘They were to cross to-day, and she is going straight to Scotland to be introduced to her husband’s mother,’ answered Mrs Clyde. ‘But I am sure, if Joan wishes to see her, she would come here first.’

‘I do not think it would be advisable,’ said the General, and then he

left the room, and Joan closed her sunken eyes.

A letter came from Miriam the next day to inquire about her, and Mrs Clyde answered it guardedly. Miriam knew Joan had been ill, but not how seriously ill she had been, and was. Mrs Clyde had thought it kinder not to make Miriam anxious about her sister during her honeymoon. But Miriam had been anxious in spite of this, and when she heard her mother and her father were at Tyford, she grew more anxious still.

But Mrs Clyde's letter from the General's house, after she had seen Joan, was, on the whole, reassuring. Joan was weak, but recovering, Mrs Clyde wrote, and the General did not think it advisable for them to have

any more company in the house at present. Joan had to be kept perfectly quiet, but when she was stronger she hoped that Miriam and her husband could come to see her.

Mrs Clyde added this apparent message from Joan (who had not sent it), because Miriam had said something about seeing Joan before she went to Scotland. But after she received her mother's letter, Miriam and Sir James decided to go direct to Kintore, and accordingly, they only stayed two days in town, and then proceeded north.

Shall we look at them for a moment as they sat side by side in the railway carriage on this journey to Miriam's future home? On Sir James's face there was absolute content, and what on Miriam's? She looked very sweet

and fair wrapped in the rich furs that had been purchased by Sir James's lavish hand. She looked, too, in her husband's face gratefully, almost fondly. The weeks they had spent together had certainly drawn her heart nearer to him. It was impossible, indeed, for a loving, sympathetic nature like Miriam's to remain quite cold to anyone so completely kind and affectionate as Sir James. She had not been used to much tenderness and consideration at home. Mrs Clyde had always been the most important personage at the Commandant's house at Newbrough-on-the-Sea. But now Miriam found herself not only surrounded by new luxuries, but by the sincerest affection and love. He was always giving her some pleasant surprise; always thinking how he could please her. She

had not forgotten her first love for the unhappy man, whose mad jealousy had so nearly shipwrecked her young life. But she undoubtedly had some feeling very like affection for Sir James. And he seemed so perfectly happy. He had no misgivings nor fears regarding their future life.

‘I am glad I can make him so happy,’ Miriam often thought in these early married days, and if a dark shadow sometimes stole over her face she always tried to smile the cloud away in the presence of Sir James.

He was naturally anxious that she should make a favourable impression on his mother, and Miriam also felt a little nervous regarding the dowager Lady MacKennon.

‘She’s old-fashioned, you know, dar-

ling,' he told her, 'and a bit prejudiced, but you'll soon fall into her ways.'

'And, of course, she will never think anyone good enough for you,' smiled Miriam.

'Yes, she will think you are too good,' answered Sir James, with a tender light in his grey eyes, as they rested on the sweet face of his young wife.

This brief conversation took place during their journey to Scotland, and was, like many of their conversations, very simple and kindly. They were excellent companions, and Sir James always looked on the bright side of everything. He was so genial that it became infectious, and Miriam sometimes found herself smiling quite brightly at his harmless jokes.

His place, Kintore, was in the Western

Highlands, a substantial grey old house standing by the blue waters of one of the most beautiful of the inland lochs. Sir James possessed a large estate here, but the principal part of his income did not arise from the heathery hills and glens of his ancestral property. His mother had been the rich and only daughter of a Glasgow shipbuilder, and when his maternal grandfather died, some years after the death of his own father, it was found that the late Mr Munro, the Glasgow shipbuilder, had bequeathed, perhaps in the pride of his heart, a large fortune to 'my grandson, Sir James MacKennon, Bart.'

To his daughter, Lady MacKennon, he also left a considerable sum, but the bulk of his money went to Sir James. Lady MacKennon, however, was a rich

woman before she received her father's legacy. Her mother, the late Mrs Munro, had been an heiress, and at her death she had left everything she had possessed to her daughter. It was after this event that the father of Sir James had married her, and people said he had done so to prop up the fallen fortunes of his house with money that had been made in trade. Miss Munro (Lady MacKennon) was not handsome, had never been handsome, and was inclined to look upon fair skins and bright eyes only as snares of the evil one. She had been proud of, and deeply attached to her well-born husband; but she had carried many of her narrow prejudices and ideas with her to her new state. Therefore, we can understand that Sir James, knowing well the

nature of this stiff, somewhat self-righteous old dame, was anxious about what she would think of his young wife. And it will be as well to tell what she did think.

It was dark, and had been dark several hours when the young couple arrived at the mansion house of Kintore. A handsome carriage had been waiting for them at the nearest station to Sir James's place, but a half moon had shone out to partly light them on their way, and its glimmer fell on the waters of the loch as they drove by its side.

‘How beautiful it seems!’ said Miriam, with enthusiasm, who had never been in the Highlands before.

‘Wait till you see it in daylight,’ answered Sir James, with some pride.

They were sitting hand-clasped, these

two, as they approached their future home, and only thoughts of happiness were in Sir James's heart. As for Miriam, she was excited by her surroundings, and had not time to think. But as they drove up the avenue to the house she clasped Sir James's hand a little tighter in her own.

‘I feel quite nervous,’ she said.

He stooped down and kissed her.

‘What for, darling?’ he whispered.

‘You are only going home.’

Almost as he said this they reached the hall door, which was standing open to receive them, and several servants also appeared. Sir James spoke kindly to some of these, and then turned and handed Miriam out of the carriage, and drawing her arm through his led her into the lighted hall. And as he did

this, a spare figure in black, with her iron-grey hair plainly braided beneath her widow's cap, appeared on the threshold of one of the rooms leading from the hall, and fixed her scrutinising gaze upon the bride.

For a moment Sir James did not see her, and Lady MacKennon did not advance. Then Sir James caught sight of his mother, and with an exclamation of pleasure ran up and kissed her furrowed cheek.

'Well, mother, here we are,' he said; 'and this,' he added, drawing his young wife forward, 'is Miriam.'

'So I supposed,' said Lady MacKennon; and she held out a bony hand enclosed in a black mitten; 'well, welcome to your husband's house, Lady MacKennon.'

She did not offer to kiss her, and Miriam felt in a moment that her reception was not a warm one. But she made the best of it. She smiled, and put her slim hand with a graceful gesture into Lady MacKennon's.

'I'm afraid Miriam will be tired, it is such a long journey,' said Sir James. 'I think, dear, you had better go upstairs at once, and get off your hat and cloak, and then mother, I am sure, will have something for us to eat.'

'Supper is prepared, James; I thought it was too late for dinner as it is past ten,' said the dowager. 'As soon as Lady MacKennon is ready you can have it.'

She spoke with a strong Scotch accent, and looked a woman of very determined will. She was hard looking, in fact,

and the stiffness of her manner and appearance made Miriam feel somewhat uncomfortable.

‘I shall be ready in a few minutes,’ she said. ‘Where is Ford? You must show me the way upstairs, James.’

‘Come along then,’ he said, brightly; it’s so jolly to see the old place again, mother, and to see you looking so well.’

Lady MacKennon’s hard face relaxed.

‘I am pleased to see you at home,’ she said, ‘and—your wife.’

‘Thanks, very much,’ answered Sir James. ‘Which room is she to have, mother?’

‘The blue room; the best,’ replied his mother; and with a good-natured nod Sir James led his young wife away.

In ‘the blue room; the best,’ as Lady

MacKennon had described it, they found Ford, and a gaunt, grizzled, hard-featured Scotchwoman, whom Sir James warmly shook by the hand.

‘Well, Jean, and how are you?’ he said, kindly. ‘This is Jean Inglewood, my mother’s maid, Miriam, and she has known me since I was a baby.’

‘Ay, Master Jim,’ said the Scotchwoman with a smile. ‘But I beg yer pardon, my leddy, I shouldna say Master Jim now, but Sir James, but I have minded him since he was a bairn.’

Miriam smiled, and held out her hand to the old serving-woman who had nursed her husband.

‘Then I must shake hands with you,’ she said, pleasantly.

Jean made her best courtesy in acknowledgment of this honour, and then

Miriam was left to the care of Ford, and presently appeared downstairs in a charming tea-gown of pale primrose silk, fantastically trimmed with white lace and ribbon; and her prim mother-in-law glanced at her costume with disapproval. Sir James, however, was enchanted with it, and was delighted to see that Miriam was looking very handsome.

‘We bought that gown in Paris, mother. Isn’t it smart?’ he said.

‘I fear Paris is a very sinful city,’ answered Lady MacKennon, with a doleful shake of her head. Whether aimed at the tea-gown or city she did not explain.

Sir James laughed good-naturedly, and then they all went into the handsome old-fashioned dining-room, where

a sumptuous supper was laid out. The heavy sideboard was laden with costly plate, and all around were the evidences of wealth. The butler had grown grey in his lady's service, and, too, remembered 'Master Jim,' and looked with great interest on his bride. During supper Lady MacKennon relaxed somewhat, and it was evident that her son was the very pride and darling of her heart. Her eyes rested on him, and softened as they looked. Sir James, too, was fond of his mother. He got up when supper was over and went to her chair and kissed her, and whispered in her ear as he did so,—

'Isn't she awfully pretty, mother?'

Lady MacKennon made no reply. She took her son's hand and patted it tenderly, as she might have done

when he was a little boy. Then she sighed softly, wishing, perhaps, that those days could come again, when she had been first in her son's heart.

But she made no complaint. And when they parted for the night, as Miriam was about to shake hands with her mother-in-law, Sir James called out, 'You should kiss her, mother.'

Then Lady MacKennon did for a moment touch Miriam's lovely face with her thin, blush-tinted lips.

'I am not much given to kissing, James—but she is your wife,' she said; and then she turned and kissed her son.

And when she went upstairs her old serving-woman was waiting to undress her, and, of course, eager to discuss the bride.

‘Well, Jean, what do you think of Sir James’s choice?’ asked Lady MacKennon.

‘Weel, my leddy,’ answered Jean, ‘she’s unco well favoured, anyhow.’

‘Beauty’s but skin deep, Jean.’

‘Ay, but the men folks think a lot o’ it,’ said Jean, reflectively.

‘It’s a snare to them,’ replied Lady MacKennon, shaking her head; ‘a pit into which many fall.’

Neither Jean, nor her mistress, however, could complain that they had wrought much evil by their good looks. They were both plain, hard-featured women, and Miriam’s beauty was no recommendation in Lady MacKennon’s eyes. Still, she did not deny it, and she was gratified the next morning by Miriam’s enthusiastic admiration of the

wild and beautiful scenery around Kintore.

‘I shall never weary of looking at it,’ said Miriam. ‘James, you never told me it was like this.’

‘It is too late to see it in perfection,’ said Sir James, going to the window and laying his hand tenderly on Miriam’s shoulder; ‘wait till we are here next August and September, it’s splendid then; isn’t it, mother?’

‘It’s like a fairy scene even now,’ went on Miriam; ‘how blue the loch is, and the dark firs, and that great mountain towering away into the sky. And have you always lived here, Lady MacKennon?’

‘Since my marriage,’ answered Lady MacKennon. ‘I came here as a bride, and will only leave it when I am carried away to my long home.’

‘No dismal talk is to be allowed, mother,’ said Sir James, in his bright, kindly way. ‘I want Miriam to enjoy her first day in her new home.’

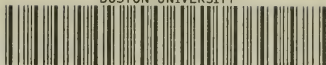
And she really did enjoy it. The weather was wonderfully fine for the season, and the whole thing was so new to her. Sir James rowed her on the blue loch, and they wandered together through the steep passes, with their grey blocks of granite standing out from the lichen and the moss. Miriam returned to the house delighted with everything, and thus also two more pleasant days were passed. There was good news, too, from Tyford. Joan was improving, Mrs Clyde wrote; and when, on the fourth day of her stay at Kintore, Miriam sat down in the inner drawing-room in the afternoon to write

to her mother and Joan, she was able to write quite in a cheerful strain.

The inner drawing-room was divided from the front drawing-room by heavy brocade silk curtains, which were always kept closed on account of the draught. They were both pleasant rooms, and on this day large and cheerful fires were burning in each. Miriam had finished her letter to her mother, and was busy writing to Joan, describing the scenery round Kintore and the place, when the butler raised the brocade curtains that divided the two drawing-rooms, and, to Miriam's intense surprise, announced 'General Conray.'

END OF VOL. II.

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